They Called Him Ringo Arenas

Dr. Henry Lydo

Chapter 1

Mysterious Sands

The glowing orb of a sinking sun stood above what gave an eerie appearance of being a distant snow capped mountainous horizon. The grizzled gaunt figure of a man leaned over a cottonwood fence holding four fingers up, spread open to block the sun from his eyes.

“Four more hours,” he announced to a younger man standing next to him. He turned from the fence, walking away. The younger man quickly followed, glancing over as if he wished to speak, but for some reason withheld.

“Do ya really think he ‘s going to come, Miguel?,” he strained himself to say in a more shrill voice of youth.

“He was reported over in Durrango only this morning around 0900. This town, if you recall, lies only twenty miles away. He rides a good quarter horse, I hear. He should already be lurking slightly outside the sight line from here, right about now, I figure,” roared Miguel in a hard voice of labor, determination, and pipe smoke to the younger man.

“What is he going to do now?,” the young man strained himself to ask.

The grizzled man eased a smile of wisdom born from years of experience in a harsh environment, as the two continued walking.

“Four more hours before sun down, my friend. That means he is only riding up to the sight line now on hour one. He’ll pause to pitch camp. Doing this will consume two more hours.”

Miguel paused in his speech with the younger man, smiling broadly to himself again, as if he somehow held some mysterious control over an unforeseen impending situation.

“But there is another hour, Miguel. What will he do with that?,” the younger man asked in a voice of frustration as he abruptly paused in his walk. “Where are you coming from with this?”

The older man smiled broader at the frustration of the younger man, who only paused. He didn’t pay much attention to him, he only smiled as he continued to gaze outward into the desert vastness beyond.

“That’s right, there are only four more hours. He is using up the first one getting just beyond the crest there on the horizon. He’ll take the next two to strike camp. Then he’ll take the following two maybe getting a bite to eat, as he figures out a plan. That’s right, he’ll be here right after dark, around seven, or maybe a bit thereafter. We’ll not hold it against him, though.”

“And what if he doesn’t?,” fired the frustrated younger man, “then what, Miguel? What are we going to do then?”

The older man continued gazing into the desert horizon, smiling with confidence born from an unknown source.

“We’ll wait,” he rumbled back to the younger man, without glancing behind himself in the man’s direction.

“Why can’t we strike out on our own?,” the young man asked in a voice of mounting frustration.

The smile suddenly sank from the older man’s face. He slowly turned around to face the younger man.

“Have you been to the Vandez?,” Miguel rumbled, with a voice now betraying some type of agitation.

“No, I haven’t, to be honest,” replied the younger man.

“Then stop your complaining. Nether has Rolf, Santiago, or Angel.”

He turned back around to face the desert vastness, in the same direction beyond the fence on the desert horizon.

“The Vandez! The native maidens! the Gamborie, for crying louder here! I have heard so much of this foolish speech for the past two months. I’ve plodded along through desert sand storms. I’ve been blistered by the beaming sun. I’ve been parched by the steady winds of the high plains. The Vandez! The Gamborie! What on earth is in this for me?”

“This man knows. He’s been there,” rumbled Miguel, still standing with his back to the younger man.

“Who is he?,” roared the young man.

There was a long pause with no reply. Miguel kept his back turned, still facing the distant horizon.

“Do we even know that much, with so much more we don’t know?,” raged the younger man toward the older one.

Another pause ensued. All that could be heard was heavy breathing.

“I tell you this much, Miguel. You’re in this for something. What percentage of it is my share? I’ve been faithful to you all the while. I’ve worked hard and faithfully supported this group, while all of you spent your days searching for I don’t know what. I feel like I deserve a good percentage of this take I know you are anticipating. There are five of us, not counting our cook. That amount equals

out to twenty percent. Miguel, I ardently demand a full twenty percent of whatever take it is you are anticipating!”

Miguel never turned, he continued to face the distant horizon, gazing onward with this almost nauseating smile of his, as if somehow mesmerized.

“Shut up your God-awful bickering about this venture, son!,” suddenly thundered Miguel, without turning.

“What did you say?,” demanded the younger man. “ I know perfectly well you heard what it was I said. I said to you, if I didn’t demand from you, twenty percent of-”

Miguel suddenly turned, producing a Smith and Wesson nine shot thirty eight from underneath his tan riding jacket. Instantly he fired three times before the young man even recognized what was going on, causing the younger man to melt down upon the ground where he stood.

“Make that twenty five percent, Nacho. My take just increased five percent, minus the cook. You get nothing!,” Miguel rumbled to himself, as he gazed outward upon the slumped corpse of the younger man. He cavalierly stepped over to the corpse, then traded his old gun for a much newer one of the same model and caliber still in the belt holster of the corpse. He carefully laid his own down in a manner accommodating to his own intention in the crime scene before him. The other four men and the cook rushed up hysterically.

“What’s the matter?,” gasped the cook nervously. “We all heard shouts and gunshots.”

“Poor chap, I yelled to him as I warned him not to play with the gun. Before I could get over to him, to take it away, the unthinkable happened. Poor, poor, son

of a bitch!," rumbled Miguel as he shook his head from side to side, "I don't know how many times I have told that boy not to play with guns. Leave 'em at home, Nacho, please don't take 'em to town, I often told him. I tell ya, I will sure hate to see him go. Oh the poor, poor, damn son of a bitch!," said Miguel as he gazed upon the corpse, shaking his head from side to side.

"The unthinkable?," asked Angel as he glared hard at Miguel.

Miguel never shuttered or blinked, he only continued gazing far outward into the vast plains beyond.

"Angel, you and the boys get him cleaned up. I'm expecting some important company very soon. I personally think the poor chap would look just fine planted out by the mesquite bushes there, between us and the bunch of prickly pear by the rocks up on the rise, yonder ways out. Get him on out there, and you'll never miss the place I am speaking of."

Angel only glared hard at Miguel as he walked nonchalantly passed the other four men, toward the old abandoned bunk house enshrouded in a cottonwood oasis, rather unique for the area. He stepped on into the bunk house, with a ragged dried wood framed door that always seemed ajar. Up against the wall directly in front was a well worn, leather covered sofa. By its left side stood a somewhat dusted and polished oaken coffee table, upon which stood a nice bottle of corked, newly purchased eastern made bourbon.

In front of the bottle stood six crystal shot glasses on a thin silver platter, upon which also stood the bottle of bourbon. He selected one, uncorked the bottle, then filled the glass, easing backward in the chair as he tipped the glass. He allowed his mind to wonder as the time seemed to drag along. As a blanket of

darkness gradually settled in, the sound of picks and shovels striking a hard, pebble filled, sandy ground in the outside distance, filled the settling evening air.

When total blackness finally set in, a hard knock rumbled upon the wooden bunk house door. Casually he arose to answer it. When he did so, a thin, but muscular man donning a Navajo range jacket crafted from woven llama hair, stood there before him. Llama hair was not native to the region. Miguel was well aware of this fact, instantly arousing suspicion. The stranger's hair was reddish brown. His complexion pale but weathered. His eyes were of a rather unsettling ice blue, again not common to the area. This man only stood before Miguel – or loomed - in a manner causing him to feel unsettled. Miguel reached outward with his right hand.

"The name's Miguel Romero. What might be your title, amigo?"

The rather strange man never returned the handshake offer. He only replied in a direct firm manner.

"Well I'm called many things. I guess you can take your pick of 'em. Some have called me El Mar, while others have called me El Viento. Then there is the one I kind of like best, personally; *Capitan De Las Arenas."*

Miguel smiled broadly with a chuckle. He grabbed the man's hand nervously as he began shaking it.

"Sure, sure, sure, no problem here! We can all work with that. What if I call you Capitan Arenas-"

The man only gazed upon Miguel , void of all expression. There was no reply. No overt display of approval or disapproval.

“Well how about-, shall we say, Senior Arenas? Does Senior Arenas sound better?”

Still there was no reply from the stranger. A rather disturbing silence resumed, while in the nighttime distance beyond, the sound of picks and shovels striking grainy ground still rang out. The sound seemingly caused the stranger to wince. Miguel nervously broke the silence.

“Senior Arenas it is, then sir. Does that sound better? I certainly think it does. I anticipate you being from Durrango. Am I correct in my anticipation, sir?

“I might have passed through there today,” the stranger spoke in reply as the outside sounds continued on in the distance. He winced slightly again as he spoke.

Miguel pointed over toward the couch by the wall.

“Have a seat, sir, if you will.”

The two began walking toward the couch.

“We might have much to discuss between us, I think.” Miguel said.

As the two seated themselves, the stranger glanced all around, only to ask;

“What’s up?”

Miguel grabbed his brier wood pipe from beside the bourbon bottle standing proudly upon the flat silver platter. He reached inside his tobacco pouch there beside it on the coffee table, then packed the bowl with his right pinkie finger.

“Could I get you a drink, sir?,” he asked as he glanced even at the stranger.

“Thanks, but no thanks,” the man replied firmly.

Miguel eased forward, lit his pipe, easing backwards on the couch.

“Are you familiar with the Coach Master over in Durrango, with a first name referred to as Mitch? He is a bit unusual, I must say. He all too often goes from inmate to Sheriff, then back to Coach Master, depending on how bad the town needs a sheriff, and what, specifically, he has been penned up for.”

The stranger narrowed his eyes off toward Miguel , then somewhat sighed, appearing to relax.

“I might have. What about him?”

“He telegraphed me recently. He described a man just like you,” continued Miguel. “Mitch informs me you have been to the Vandez.”

“I’ve been many places, sir. Yes, the Vandez is only one. So what about it?,” firmly replied the stranger back to Miguel .

“Well, I’m gonna get real with you on this mater, and very personal, sir.”

Miguel leaned over in the direction of the stranger.

“Does the legend of *Ataúd Cielo Del Rey* ring any bells with you?”

“It might,” snapped the stranger without flinching nor betraying any emotion. “I might know a bit about it,” replied the stranger without volunteering anything. The stranger sighed again after a pause in silence, turning cautiously toward Miguel .

“I’ve been to the ruined city of antiquity, Vandez. I’ve seen many sights there.” The stranger leaned over toward Miguel, whispering in rather mysterious tones. “In all confidence, I know where the coffin lies, amigo.”

Miguel couldn’t refrain from suddenly breaking a smile. He desperately wanted to leap from his seat, but fought hard within himself to contain the excitement and his ever mounting joy.

“Excellent, certainly the best news I have heard all day. Would you have a drink with me, sir?”

The stranger never broke a smile nor displayed any emotion.

“So now it is my turn to ask the questions.” He leaned backward firmly into his seat. “What’s my take in this venture?”

Miguel reached for the Bourbon bottle, then poured two crystal shot glasses full, handing one to the stranger, who received it.

“Minus the cook? Twenty percent, of course!,” Miguel chuckled. “He gets regular camp cook salary.”

The stranger gazed around, then took the shot rather eagerly. A smile streaked across Miguel’s face again.

“Who are the extra boots for outside by the door?,” the stranger cordially asked Miguel .

“Extra boots? I have no idea,” Miguel replied rather nervously.

Suddenly the door burst open, and the three men entered in from the outside.

“Our task has been completed,” stated Angel. “I had a feeling you might want to keep the boots, sir, so I placed them by the door not long ago. I forgot you had company in here.”

“Run along! Run along now. We have much to discuss among ourselves, and big plans for the days to come,” Miguel spoke to his company as he attempted to feign a calm veneer.

As the three men hastily stepped out the door, Miguel shut it snugly behind them, turning nervously once more again toward the stranger.

“Never mind them. You know all to well how it is when you own a work crew, now.”

The stranger sighed, glancing toward Miguel with a rather hard appearance on his face.

“To speak the truth, somehow I get the feeling if I had been a day earlier as I had originally planned, my take in this venture would have only been some sixteen and a half percent.”

He smiled hard toward Miguel when he spoke. Miguel never answered, only remaining calm as he changed the subject of conversation with the stranger, in a grand effort at retaining tact and being deceitful.

“We have lots to speak of come first light tomorrow. There are many supplies for us to gather in, as I am sure you already know. We have plans to make in this dawning heavenly partnership of ours.”

“Partnership?,” asked the stranger with a puzzled look on his face, “heavenly?”

“That’s right, Senior Arenas! We have places to go together, and so much too much to see. Meeting people can come about after the fact, later on down the road. Don’t you think?,” he chuckled to the stranger as the rather tall man arose, picking up his plainsman’s sombrero from his lap, and walking to the door. The stranger never laughed nor spoke as he rather stealthily stepped through the door. Miguel closed the door tightly after he passed, leaning backward against it, smiling to himself as he fought an ever mounting desire to leap up and down in great joy.

Chapter 2

Job Details

The sun had barely crested the morning sky when Miguel arose from his military cot he used for a bed. He forced his swelled feet and ankles down into the legs of his boots with a hearty grunt, then stumbled toward the door of the bunk house. There was no noise in the small cabin, so he assumed the others must have already made their way outside. *The stranger would be in shortly*, he told himself as he radiated that same morning smile of confident accomplishment he had on his face yesterday evening when the stranger made his exit.

When he opened the door, the cool morning wind coming inside across the desert from the snow capped mountains in the far distance, was well worth him pausing to inhale deeply. The sensation it left him with was one of a near perfect, clear headed energy from within, delightfully aiding the general cause of any man with accomplishments to make for the day. Even though the sun had yet to peek above the horizon, there were still enough rays to enlighten his surroundings.

Miguel stepped out upon the flat stone steps of the neglected cow hand bunkhouse, then paused in contemplation again to survey the surroundings. From the dark left hand side of the topographic dip in which the cottonwood oasis was positioned, he perceived the thud and scratch on gritty sand, of boots. From that darkness he also clearly heard the quick snort of a horse, or possibly

three. He froze solid upon the step where he stood, carefully observing this dark area from where the sounds came.

Three male figures lumbered through the darkness nearer toward a more open, enlightened area. One of them stooped and seemingly began stacking some pieces of scattered drift wood he had simultaneously gathered from around him. He clearly perceived sounds of scratches on the ground in the area, and a very audible click of what he instantly recognized to be steel against stone. An abrupt blaze of naturally dried cactus punk and a pocket mouse's rather large nest, signaled the forth coming snap of a breakfast fire.

"Angel! Is that you I hear out there?," Miguel boisterously yelled into the gradually enlightening darkness.

There was a pause and no reply.

"Rolf? Santiago? Who moves about in the morning coolness there?"

"Its only us stirring the morning fire and getting supplies gathered for what we already know will be a journey," the voice of Angel rumbled as it broke the still morning air. "Hell Pops, I'm more than ready to get a move on, myself!"

Miguel stepped from the flat stone of the cabin, then cavalierly strode over in the direction of the fire.

"Seeing this activity without me having to give an order makes me very happy first thing in the morning men. Where is the stranger? Has anybody seen him yet?," he stated firmly.

"No, none of us have seen him yet," informed the more tenor voice of Santiago.

Santiago was the next youngest in the group after Nacho. Since Nacho wasn't around anymore, then he was the youngest. He was cordially invited among the group as its record keeper. He was more the bookish type, always reading poetry or big thick books dealing with complicated philosophic subject material; like Romanticist philosophy nobody else present could even understand or wanted to bother wasting time with, as they loved to speak aloud when they notice him reading. At times, however, he did possess life saving, valuable knowledge gained from reading, that no others around him were in possession of. This fact of being was how he maintained a level of respect among the other men in the group. He was more along for the exotic thrill that he could report on without mentioning true names, rather than seeking riches, fame, glory, or to relish in any type of nonconformist criminal lifestyle. There was an unspoken expectation that Santiago would one day facilitate a swashbuckling public image of themselves.

"Here I am Miguel. What do you want with me?," spoke a sharp direct voice from an invisible form obviously lurking somewhere in the backdrop. All four men snapped around in sudden astonishment. How long had he been there? When did he arrive? All of them seemed to ask each other these questioned with their eyes, as they glanced around, peering into the remaining wall of darkness.

"Well, praises be, sir," Miguel stated with brightness in his voice on noticing the address to be the voice of the stranger. "We are so glad you have made it in here this morning. We need you to help us gather in the tools from those packs laying over in the rear, up a ways on the hillside there."

“Our agreement was for me to be a part of this team, wasn’t it?,” asked the stranger to Miguel.

“Why yes, so it certainly was! We all need you to be a part of this venture, in fact.”

“Walk passed the fire there, in front a ways over on that hill up from it, but still not far away from it at all. The tools are already gathered into a pile. All we need to do now is eat and go.”

Miguel turned toward the others moving back and forth in what appeared as utter bewilderment, from the darkened hillside where the carefully transported supply packs lay, to the now glowing fire.

“Do you hear that? Walk on passed the fire upward from my direction, right there by the fire. All of our tools and supplies are already moved there, thanks be to the kind gentleman here!,” applauded Miguel.

When the three walked there, sure enough, the tools and supplies were already collected into their proper places. Santiago began digging into the supply bags, obviously gathered from their chuck wagon parked in the direction from where they had just walked earlier before the fire was alight. He sought out a measure of flour, lintel beans, mesquite cured bacon, and coffee. By the pack lay the small skillet and the tin coffee pot, and five tin cups. Strangely enough, there was enough water in the pot already for the coffee to be brewing. Santiago skillfully gathered all of this material, made his way toward the fire, then commenced stirring the food and brewing the coffee. Soon up walked Miguel closer in toward the cracking fire, as the others were gathering around also.

“Isn’t it so kind of this gentleman here, to have acted on his own fore-sight, and saved the rest of us from all of this morning labor? Are you aware of the time reserve in him making this simple small effort on all of our behalf?,” Miguel asked as he smiled broadly in new confidence. “Like I have always said, and I am not about to change now; time spent equates to money.”

Santiago began to fill the coffee cups without replying, as he skillfully handed them out to the others. The stranger stepped out of the darkness to take his share of the cup. Miguel stepped off to the side, searching through the supplies while the food was being prepared, and the others paused around the flame. Angel chucked to himself as he turned the edge of his cup up, glaring hard at the stranger over the edge as the dancing light from the fire lit his face up in timeless flashes.

“So you are this new man we hear so much about around here, eh?,” Angel spoke rather laconically to Miguel, as he smiled an intimidating glare at the stranger, who made no immediate reply.

“Now fellow, what it is you call yourself,?,” asked Rolf, standing on the opposite side of the fire from Angel. “What was it now? Something, Areanas, or something?”

All of them broke out into a rumbling chuckle, except Santiago, who labored by the morning fire preparing the morning meal, speaking nothing nor mentioning anything to give any indication of attention to the conversation, yet was fully aware of everything.

“What kind of name is that? Sands?,” continued Rolf. “ Who exactly do you think you are around here anyway? You don’t look like anybody important to me!”

All of them chuckled lowly among themselves as they eyed hard toward the stranger, who only said nothing, stooding by in the remaining darkness immediately beyond the sight line from the campfire, sipping coffee over the edge of his own tin cup. Miguel suddenly rushed up from doing his check among the supplies.

“Everything is great around here, except we don’t have enough ammunition, and no mercury. We are desperately in need of mercury, you know?,” curtly informed Miguel in his firm voice.

No immediate reply came from the men who gathered by the fire. Santiago gazed into the eyes of Rolf, who gazed blankly into the eyes of Angel. All of them eventually gazed hard at the stranger, who only stood by in the darkened shadow line, saying nothing.

“Mercury?,” suddenly fired Angel, “Who ever told us anything about needing it?

Angel narrowed his eyes, gazing directly into the faces of the men standing around him.

“Why the hell would we need such a thing as mercury around here, way out in these parts?,” spoke Rolf, who was long haired and rather unkempt, in a dirty sort of way. All of his knowledge originated with pure experience, since he read little nor had any time for it. “What on earth, that we are not even aware of, could facilitate a need for that?”

Miguel huffed in apparent frustration, stumbling somewhat as he spoke.

“Well, everybody needs to have a supply of mercury on them every time they travel outside, if they plan on remaining out for any time. Mercury is good for many things.”

“Like what?,” suddenly fired Rolf, in a hard voice of sudden mistrust.

“Well.., we can tell the temperature with it, and it makes a good base for paint, when we need to mix some,” stumbled Miguel, in his explanation for the need.

“Is that all? Is that what makes this worthless missing junk you speak of here, so all fired important that you rage at us so first thing in the morning, Popsie?,” thundered the practical hard voice of Rolf toward Miguel.

“The bright eyes of Santiago glanced around suddenly into the every face. He pushed himself to speak.

“There is one other use I know of. People use it who are in search of gold,” he almost squeaked out.

“So that is it, your big secret? What you are in search of so around here, without telling any of us? Hmm, answer that much now, Miguel!,” Angel thundered suddenly.

“El Obregon is only nine miles east of here. Its the closest settlement. I’ll be glad to ride into town there, and pick up your requested items.” offered the gentleman stranger. “Matter of fact, a list of any anticipated items might be nice to carry along with me. I can be back, right here with the materials, before the sun is ten O clock high. That is, if I exit out now.”

“Good enough,” sighed Miguel after a pause.

He reached into the rear pocket of his brand new Levis jeans, nervously snatching up a note pad and a pencil. He briskly jotted some details on the note pad, then quickly handed the pad over to the stranger as he walked up. He quickly reached into his other pocket, snatching out a wad of hard cash, handing that over to the stranger as well.

“Here, take that,” Miguel said, as he tossed the folded cash wad before the stranger, toward his feet, who skillfully caught it without dropping a single bill as the folded wad glided through the air. “It will more than cover the price of these needed items. Since you have already proven yourself as being valuable to our troop, you may cheerfully keep the remainder as your first due compensation.”

The stranger glanced down at the cash wad now in his hand, and carefully counted four hundred dollar bills. *Rather big damn money for a loner way out in these parts*, he thought as he counted.

As the stranger turned to walk away, Angel drew another long sip from his coffee cup, taking it down and swallowing hard as the stranger walked passed them, toward what could readily be discerned in the increasing morning light, as being the stranger’s horse tied up quietly in the back drop immoderately out of sight.

“Well, I’ll be Goddamned,” Angel said in a clearly audible voice as the stranger strode on passed, “if it ain’t good ole Captain Sands here to save the day. Isn’t it so nice for all of us to just.., have him around like that? Isn’t it just like the Sandman here, to do such a helpful thing for the likes of dirty rotten us?”

The others laughed with the exception of Santiago, who still glared hard at Miguel while the stranger strapped on his saddle, then untied his horse.

“And oh, Sands there,” Angel laughed as he glanced around in sarcasm at the others, “I mean Captain Sands.. Don’t you get caught up in any riffraff while you ‘re way out in town, there now. I hear its a real live, crazy, rootin’ tootin’ place around there now; with lots of bitches, witches, mad cows, fat sows, and virtually all of ‘em with great big nasty holes just begging to be filled! If you were to somehow get all hung up around there, now, all of us little boys out here., all alone., would take a great big, long and hard one, slammed right up hard into the old poot chute! You know what I mean, ole Hoss there?”

The stranger paused his horse while the others rolled in laughter. When they seemed to have had their fill of fun, he tugged at the horse reins gently, then nudged the horses sides with what appeared to be his silver spurs. As his horse turned, the voice of Angel seemed to roar.

“Especially ole Miguel over there. He’ll be sweating bullets, chewing nails, and spitting spikes should you fail to return. Yeah, boys, he’s certainly after something hard, and he don’t want us to know about any of it, cause we’ll surely demand our share! What a you boys think about it around here?”

The others around him raged with laughter, but the stranger kept on riding forward along, gradually moving eastward, without glancing backward toward any of them.

At full gallop he made it into El Obregon inside of an hour and a half. The terrain was rough, but his horse was fresh and strong, like himself. As his horse proudly ambled along down the main street in town, ahead loomed the dry goods store, bearing the words in large capitol letters across its wooden front; *DOWLESS DRY GOODS, DEALS, AND COMPANY.*

Three stores down was the wooden, swinging star sign of the US Marshall's office. He paused his horse by the Marshall's office front, tying him securely with the bridle reins onto the hitching post. He casually strode inside, respectfully removing his sombrero as he came to stand before the Marshall. The Marshall stood, reaching out to shake the stranger's hand.

"What can I do for you today, Ringo?"

"Do you have any work assignments on hand that I could take?," the stranger asked.

"I might," snapped the Marshall in cheerful return.

He rummaged around through stacks of papers on his desk. Finally he selected a certain folded paper, then carefully unfolded it, pausing to read.

"There is a gang of serious thugs out and about somewhere in these parts, Ringo. There are five of them. The leader is referred to as Miguel. Miguel is a con-artist, an outright thief, and quite possibly a flat-out murderer. All of them are his accomplices, except one referred to as Santiago. Santiago is only a college boy, who is out for a bit of adventure. He is an avid reader, a writer matter of fact, who simply fell in with the wrong crowd. He is not really guilty of anything, yet still mind you, he is an accomplice in crime. If you could bring him in, we could harvest a ton of information from him, then simply allow him to go free; since at this point he is not deemed as any type of threat."

"What about the others?," curtly asked the stranger to the Marshall.

"The others have their own personal stories, Ringo. The most innocent one, besides Santiago, is one known as Nacho. Misdemeanor theft is his only crime. He has done a bit of poaching out on the rancher's farmlands, but nothing major.

He might have nabbed a calf or three when he was hard up for food, but nothing else more than that."

"Well Nacho is not your worry anymore, Fred. Miguel solved that problem for you, I am certain. I don't know the exact details regarding the circumstance, but I do know six feet of dirt has taken care of it, and Miguel was responsible somehow. That much I am absolutely certain of right now."

"Outside of Santiago, Ringo I need you to bring them into me, dead or alive. The one they call Angel is a ruthless random murder, have no doubt about it. He is more dangerous than Miguel. Rolf is the most calculating, in a practical sense. You'll still need to watch your step around him as well, however. He will not act without reason, as Angel will, who acts on sheer impulse and assumption, all logic regarding the situation be damned. We want these men, here or in any Marshall station, dead or alive. The word is already out. They are wanted for theft and murder charges here in El Obregon, in Durrango, Mote Albane, all the way as far north as Abilene, Reno, and even in Dodge City," Fred the Marshall informed.

"Do you know anything about a man from Durrango wanting something to do with these people, Fred?," asked the stranger to the Marshall.

"Yeah, he was operating with them through their proxy. His name is Jim Halberth. In the criminal underworld he is referred to as *Mitch Wiseman*. Halbeth is only a petty criminal searching for an opportunity. He hasn't yet directly committed any hard crimes, He'll break for us, just as soon as we manage to throw enough money in front it him. He was the one who recently informed me where he had already put you onto Miguel. Be careful, however,

Halberth usually goes to the highest bidder, Ringo. He has no solid alliances, except to the money. I already know I can place big trust in you, Ringo. You are good, and all of us throughout every lawless territory knows it."

"What's on?," the stranger asked in confidence.

The marshal reached into a drawer underneath his desk. He pulled out a stack of bills. Directly off the top he shucked off five hundred dollar bills, planking them down before the stranger on the desk, who silently counted every one as it fell.

"Here are five big ones just to get you started. I have faith in you. I know how you work. You brought in four of the most wanted, Rossman bothers, helped us apprehend the Dillingers, who we only chased across the desert sands blindly for five years. I know you. You're trustworthy, and damn good at doing your job. Bring 'em in, dead or alive. The price right now is *three thousand smackers a head in American gold or bills*.

"The price is the same on either side of the boarder, Ringo, except you may go down as a folk hero of some sort in Mexico. Apache scalps go for five hundred a piece. Coyote and wolf scalps still go for a hundred, cash. Rattle snake skins fetch fifty, or a hundred alive, take your pick. Round all of 'em up and bring 'em here, or turn 'em in at any Marshall station, anywhere. Remember there are US Marshall stations across the boarder right here at us, as well. Its taking all of us working together to bring these parasites in, Ringo, and I have faith in you personally, more so than anybody else. Your past as captain of the Army scouts must still be paying off for you way out in no man's land , eh?"

“Thanks for the info. And sir, consider this job a done deal,” spoke the cool headed stranger as he turned toward the door.

“Oh?,” spoke the Marshall. The stranger paused, “Don’t forget this. it may come in handy as time goes on,” he said as he carefully placed a tin star into the stranger’s coat pocket.

The stranger nodded, then turned to push his way out the door of the Marshall's office. He carefully untied his horse, then eased into the skillfully secured saddle. Slowly he made his way back down the main-street, toward old man, Jarmon Dowless’s, dry goods store.

Chapter three

The First Assault

Across the main street from where the stranger rode, was a large two story building struggling to appear fancy in the wind swept sand and cacti. Up on the top balcony sat twelve, well dressed women. Four of them waved lively. One had sandy hair splattering down upon a massive bosom, seeming as it if might dump from her low cut, multicolored Can-can dress. On the surface she appeared as being attractive, but the more the stranger gazed upon her figure, the more she appeared as hiding underneath a virtual wagon load of Sears and Roebuck makeup paint. Out on the range men sarcastically referred to women's makeup as mankind's doll paint, women's war paint, scum coating, or stretch mark covering.

"What have we here, prancing about before us today on a white and brown pony, gals?," she announced with a gleeful face, as the unresponsive stranger rode on passed the balcony where all of them sat idly about in the shade, sipping mint julep. "Hey now, stranger! They call me Queen Jezebel around here. Any cowboy from anywhere who has passed through these parts, knows about me and the sweet generous sized goody bag I tote, baby! What's your name? We've never seen the likes of you around in these parts!"

“Looks like new meat to me,” another spoke from within the twelve, who gazed outward as the stranger passed. “hope he swings with as much to sling, as his pony does walkin’ yonder! Hey, hey, it ain’t always about money around here, my sweet honey bees!”

“I should say he looks like at least a hundred dollar bill with legs, on a horse!,” laughed another from behind the group somewhere. The stranger glanced upward, failing to figure out which one.

“If he has the right green to push, then I have the precious wool to throw to him!,” yelled another, much younger, mysterious feminine voice from among the gathered, lowly cast bunch, “and gals, I don’t know about any of you, but I don’t hold out on anything, just as long as he don’t. I tell you all that much around here, right now!”

After his pony walked passed the balcony, still the first woman with the huge bosom, continued to yell profane greetings at him.

“You hear all of this Mr.? Now you don’t go an’ hear gals yell at a feller like that just anywhere. I’ll tell ya somethin’ else, we don’t yell at just anybody like that either! We holler at you because you’re special. That’s why they call this place *Good Ole Aint Molly’s Slam Jam*, cause if you got the doe to slam in front of us ones, then we have the perfect place for you jam that joy stick. We’ll give it how ever you feel like takin’ it, ya hear? You un’ come on back now, and set a spell with us. We can talk a while about it, and stir us up a good pot o’ somethin’ for sure!”

The stranger never glanced back. By the time he made it over to the dry goods store, they were still yelling out loud as he tied his horse. He glanced up

on the wooden porch and the store front facade. The store had a wide open screen door, with two swinging doors like those found on a saloon. Every now and then a person could be seen walking inside, or walking out. Virtually every person who did so held a burlap bag in their hand.

After he secured his horse on to the hitching bar, he opened the snap button on his thick leather saddle bag, producing his own burlap bag. He carried this bag as he walked somewhat cautiously into the store. A rather timid, but somewhat attractive Navajo girl appearing from a back room, approached him in her native dress.

“Could I help you, sir?

“I have an order here I need filled,” replied the stranger, as he laid the note pad before the native girl.

“This list looks pretty long,” she said.

The stranger gave no reply. The girl held the note firmly in her left hand, then glanced up into his face.

“You don’t look familiar. I know I’ve only worked here, er, maybe six months. Allow me to fetch the store owner, if you may,” spoke the girl to the stranger.

She smiled a somewhat shy smile, then quickly raced down the isle behind the counter, turning into the rear of the store. The stranger continued to glance around. There were pistols of a variety in caliber, boxes filled with ammunition, and fresh plug chewing tobacco. There was also liquor of nearly every stripe, from Mexican Tequila, to Tswain, all the way up to eastern made Bourbon. The clothing seemed to be well stitched and very durable. There were newly made leather boots.

Toward the rear of the store a grizzled, hired boot smith, hammered away at a worn out sole needing repair work. He glance up from his labor with a hard glare directed toward the stranger, pausing momentarily in apparent wonderment, then resumed his task at hand.

A mid sized middle aged man wearing an apron raced up, standing before the stranger. He walks up quickly, pausing before the stranger while standing behind his counter. He reaches over to shake the stranger's hand, and the stranger accepts.

"The name is Dowless, Jarmon Dowless, but most around here simply call me Jr. I own the business here. I see the lady has a purchase order from you. Is that right?"

"Yeah, I gave her one," replied the stranger with a slight smirk on his face.

"I don't think I have seen you here before, but then again, I see many people on a day in day out basis," replied the store owner with a somewhat nervous smile.

"I've stopped in here a time or two, sir.," replied the stranger.

The store owner studied the stranger for a small spell before asking any more questions.

"Who sent you in here, if you don't mind me asking?," the stranger inquired.

"Do you know the Coach Master over in Durrango?," asked the stranger to the store owner.

The store owner made a quick glance over toward the native girl. He turned back toward the stranger in an apparent air of hesitation.

"Can't say that I do," he replied as he scratched his chin.

“Heard of a man named Romero?,” the stranger asked the store owner.

“You wouldn’t be speaking of a man known as Miguel, now would you?,” replied the store owner.

He glanced over at the native girl again, who instantly turned, racing hysterically toward the back of the store, seeming to conceal herself inside the rear stock room.

“Yeah., I’m afraid that’s the one,” spoke the stranger to the store owner.

“Here, you just wait patently right there, now,” spoke the store owner to the stranger in a very uneasy voice. “I’ll get you everything you want on that list.”

He laid the list down upon the counter before the stranger.

“Now let’s be clear on this list, and you correct me if I am wrong. This list amounts to four ounces of mercury. A hundred rounds of 38 caliber ammunition. One ammunition belt. A hatchet. One pick, the short kind one can transport as he rides his horse. Thirty feet of rope. Four burlap bags, and nine sticks of dynamite. Several blankets were also listed on this note here. Is all of that, it?,” the store owner asked, glancing up into the stranger’s face, laughing in an obviously nervous voice, attempting to break what he perceived as being ice between the two.

“That sounds about right,” firmly replied the stranger.

“Now lets see, the mercury is forty dollars, the ammunition is forty dollars. The ammunition belt is ten. The hatchet is five. The pick is five,” the store owner said as he glanced up in a nervous glare. “That comes out to a hundred now.”

“You count yours, and I’ll handle my end of the bargain,” replied the stranger.

“The rope is ten more. The four burlap bags add up to twenty. The nine sticks of dynamite come to forty more,” the clerk announced nervously. “So far it comes to one hundred seventy.”

“Yeah, well you keep talking, and I’ll keep on counting,” replied the stranger.

“It looks like four wool blankets, which comes to twenty more, sir. So your total comes to one hundred ninety thus far.

The stranger removed four hundred new crisp bills from his pocket. He peeled off two of them, handing them to the store owner, who now appeared even more nervous than before. The store owner commanded for the native girl to gather the items, as he nervously followed her to the back stock room. As the girl placed the requested items into a new burlap bag, the store owner headed back over where the stranger stood, tightly clenching the ten dollar bill as change. He breathed heavily as he handed the stranger the bill.

“We sure are glad you came inside, and it was a pleasure doing business with you, sir. Come on back to visit with us anytime,” Dowless spoke to the stranger in a nervous voice.

The native girl struggled to drag the bag on the hardwood floor, finally making it to the stranger, while remaining on the opposite side of the counter. A look of dreadful apprehension filled her face and general composure as she wadded the bag, struggling to hand it over to the stranger from across the sales counter. The stranger heaved the bag over the counter, flung it across his back, then slowly strode his way toward the doorway, making his way back out toward his tied horse. He carefully tied the goods onto his saddle, then slowly made his way back inside the store.

He walked through the door, and again the girl raced into the back room hysterically. In a very nervous composure the store owner soon rushed out to meet him.

“Sir, is anything wrong? Are we missing something?,” he asked as he pretended to smile.

“A few more things, and nothing else,” replied the stranger. “I need a hundred more rounds of 38 caliber bullets.”

“That comes to forty dollars,” replied the store owner.

“Four twists of chewing tobacco.

“Five dollars,” nervously replied the store owner.

“Twelve sticks of dynamite.”

“That’ll be sixty dollars,” replied the dry goods owner.

The stranger turned around, noticing the attractive bottles of eastern made bourbon.

“And a bottle of Welshman’s Plantation Old Number Nine, there. That’ll be all.”

A look of intense nervousness materialized over the store owners entire composure.

“My, well that sure is an expensive bottle of bourbon there, might I say,” he said the stranger.

“You keep on talking there, and I’ll keep on counting,” replied the stranger to the store owner.

“Normally that liquor is sixty dollars a bottle, see? It was shipped all the way from the coast, in South Carolina,” informed Jarmon Dowless. “It came from the

world famous plantation of John Welsh, you know. I'll tell ya what, eh? I'll let you have it for forty instead of sixty. Is that a fair deal?"

"A deal it is, then," replied the stranger. "Start talking, and I'll begin counting."

He reached inside his pocket and retrieved two more crisp hundred dollar bills.

"The ammo is forty dollars. The tobacco is five. The dynamite is sixty. The whiskey is.. forty," spoke the store owner as he trembled.

"The total comes to a hundred forty five," replied the stranger as he handed over two hundred dollars. The store owner quickly raced back into the store, retrieving the fifty five dollars in cash, handing it over to the stranger.

Suddenly the door burst open. In walked four men. All four stood to intentionally block the doorway. One seemed to be in his early thirties, bewhiskered, and dressed like a saddle slouch who had been on the range for months. There wasn't much organization about him.

The other was dressed in a new vest, hat, gun holster, appearing over weight for these parts. He might have been around forty.

The third was dirty, wore denim coveralls and an old straw hat. He chewed tobacco and smiled, as he glared in the direction of the stranger.

The forth appeared to be the hardest one, and the most determined. He was older in his age, but had every stick of his thinning graying hair, in perfect place. His Stetson hat was brand new.

"I knew it was you who walked up soon as I saw you walk through the doorway. I couldn't help but study your horse out there, I mean, really study him

up close. I found him, I know I have for sure, boys now. You all hear me in here? This man is the one and only, Ringo Areanas, the great *Captain Of The Desert Sands*, the Apache scouts used to call him. You in here got that?," roared the older forth man.

" Wanna know what I call him? I call him damn liar and a thief, a no good son of a bitch, double crosser 's what I call him!"

The man glanced around at the others, as both the store clerk and the girl raced into the back room, seeking to barricade themselves. The patrons inside the store dropped their gathered goods, racing around the congregated four, scattering out into the bustling streets.

"Tell you what Ringo. I'll make it more interesting to you. We two are alike in many a way. There's a nice price on my head right now. Two thousand for me, and a thousand each for my younger assistants here. You double crossed my former employers, the Dillengers, do you remember them, man? Hell now, I just know you hadn't forgotten them yet!

"We were not stealing cattle, we were only borrowing them from owners who didn't even care enough to keep 'em in line where they needed to be. We all had a fine business going at rounding these strays up. We offered to sell 'em back, but they refused our price, demanding that we hand 'em over for nothing. You didn't have to turn us over like you did, Ringo. The Dillingers were honest. They always did what they said they would do."

The older man glanced around at the others with an intimidating smile on his face.

“Now guess what, Ringo boy? We’re going to do what we said we were going to. We’re going to see if you’ll give up the big money on our heads, for the much bigger price out on yours!”

The older man reached underneath his riding coat, pulling out his Colt 45, six shot.

“Now, its gonna be show and tell time,” he announced, as he glanced back somewhat nervously toward the swinging doors. The three others did the same.

In the same instant the stringer whipped out his own Smith and Wesson six shot, firing on all four men, almost in perfect time with him removing the pistol from his thick vest pocket. All four collapsed onto the floor without firing a single shot. The store owner stepped out of the back room, very nervously observing the disturbing situation on his property.

“Help me pick these dead men up and carry them outside,” the stranger asked.

“Do we need an undertaker?,” asked Dowless.

“Its on the house, if only you help me carry them outside where my horse is tied.”

“Not a problem stranger, not a problem,” nervously spoke Dowless as he agreed to accommodate the stranger.

In twenty minutes the men had the bodies laying out beside the place where the horse was tied. The stranger took the rope, securing one end to one dead man’s foot, then the other rope end to his saddle horn. He nudged his horse as he began dragging the corpse backwards in the direction from where he had ridden up. Inside ten minutes the corpse was laying out beside the Marshall’s

station. Inside thirty more, the other three dead men were laying beside the first one. Casually the stranger eased down from his horse, walking across the porch at the Marshall's station, knocking on the man's door. The door opened.

"Well I'll be darned, back so soon, mate?," asked the Marshall to the stranger.

"Found something here you might be in need of," the stranger said as he pointed toward the four dead men laying by his wooden porch at the side.

The two men walked over to the place where the four corpse lay.

"I was afraid of that," said the Marshall soon as he saw the men's faces.

"Afraid of what?," asked the stranger.

"These are the Miller brothers. They are agents of Dillengers, the same one's you helped to prosecute. They've been causing trouble around here for a long time. They were always quiet when I was in town. They laid low, going their way, while everybody else went theirs. I guess they became a bit excited when they got a glimpse of you, a stranger, in town. You should have been here all along to handle all of this for us, Ringo. Step back inside the office with me a minute."

Both men walk back onto the porch, and inside the office. Quickly he opens the drawer and snatches a wad of cash out. He begins shucking hundreds into the strangers opened right hand. Four crisp, five hundred dollar bills are counted out neatly.

"They were rather minor criminals compared to the big dogs you will soon be after," the Marshall informed him. "But if you ever want full time work, just let me know. We have a place for you here in the Marshall service, and the pay is generally pretty good."

The stranger stuffed the bills in his vest pocket with his right hand, then turned toward the Marshall, smiling.

“I’ll think about it, Fred.”

He walked back out the door, untied his horse, mounted up, then headed back toward the dry goods store. Thankfully the porch queens had gone back into their roosts, or were busy in other matters of the flesh. When he passed by the dry goods store, the owner, Dowless, was standing out front watching him intensively as he rode along.

“There you are, the magnificent one! The word has now gotten out all around here. So they call you Ringo Arenas, do they?,” he yelled as the rider passed, who glanced sharply from underneath his plainsman’s sombrero, but never gave reply.

Chapter Four

His Return

As the stranger rode along after exiting the town limits, he couldn't help but glance upward into the sky. The sun appeared to sit on the edge of 0900. He promised Miguel he would arrive back in camp by nine. Deep down he knew this man's patience would become challenged quickly. There was no doubt in the stranger's mind where Miguel Romero was on some sort of self-serving mission in searching for the fabled long lost *Coffin Of The Ancient Sun God*.

Luckily for him, he always maintained positive relations with the native populations, even though at times he had no alternative choice but to fight them. The natives were well aware of their war parties threatening his survival. They admired him for his craft in making a solid stand, and his determination in not allowing himself to become overwhelmed by their advance, even in the face of death. The prospect of death in the most horrible way, should he suffer capture by their forces, had not caused him to abate in his hard line stance against them, when times arrived where he needed to make one. Thus, in so doing, they respected him, and he mutually returned that respect.

Among the native tribes in times of adversity and danger, often he found shelter and accommodation. He found food among their number during times of great famine, which frequently afflict the desert areas of Sierra Madrea, and the Mexican desert as a whole. He shared information in regard to their enemies, and they in regard to his, The natives possessed an amazing accuracy of insight through the clairvoyance of their numerous prophets, that he had learned to fully

trust over the course of time. They also possessed medicine wisdom far beyond the supposed superior technologies of the Spanish or the English. Even though at times he was forced to shoot natives for his own self-preservation, he also held a special place for them and their beautiful culture, deep inside his heart.

In the Spanish language translation of the native tongue, this ancient Sun God was known as *Maestro Del Mas Alla'*. During a most distant age of humanity, glowing beings from beyond were said to have descended to earth. The beings were said to hail from the constellation of Pieces, from somewhere inside the brilliant solar system of Ares. Beings hailing from the constellation of Orion were also said to have made contribution. These entities referred to by the ancients as *Star Children*, established flourishing colonies on earth at a place in approximation to the fabled city of mysterious origin, grand *Tenochtitlan*. Their superior original king who hailed from Ares, was this fabled leader.

It was directly from them that all of humanity originated in an unknown age of farthermost antiquity. During those days these *Star Children* lived a lifespan far greater than present day humanity. Many individuals, so it was told, often lived two or even three thousand years. The great king and his family, were granted the most enduring lifespan, living and reigning nine thousand years.

Finally his time came to an end, and his earth bound mortality revealed itself. This earth bound mortality was said to have materialized due to the thinning atmosphere and the soil born chemicals of earth, not accommodating blood rejuvenation for an indefinite period of time, as the situation was inside the solar system of Ares. As the atmosphere thinned down through the ages, and negative chemicals build up inside the soil of earth, lifespans of these divine beings

gradually became more mortal. Finally these beings divided up into opposing clans, according to the ageless Apache and Navajo tradition, and these groups deteriorated into the mortal clans of our present age, eventually spreading outward to fill the entire earth.

The ruined metropolis realm of of the *Vandez* was said to have been the first city constructed by these mysterious Star Children upon their exit from their place of origin. The other half formed the ancient city of *Tenochtitlan*, so the timeless story was told by the tribes of the Sierra Madrea.

The Vandez was said to have possessed technology exceeding that of the present day, to an amazement. They possessed flying ships that shot bolts of solar light and static electricity, evaporating men, buildings, whole forests, cities, and even small mountains. At the time during those days of farthermost antiquity it was said they ruled a world empire, with great air fields, where they could trade by traveling to and fro. As these god-beings deteriorated, they became corrupted by the forces of greed, envy, lust, denial of all divinity, defilement of the earth, complacency, apathy, and outright hatred for one another. Marriage with alien demonic entities said to have originated from Orion, and world wide warfare among city states inside their own empire, eventually degenerated into their own complete downfall as both a mighty civilization and a heritage demographic. We, of our own day to include all the nations of planet earth, are only the miserable arrogant crumbs of the glory they once were, according to this native tradition.

One day in a distant future age, it has been said that these beings from beyond shall return to redeem the deteriorated populations of earth back into their

astonishing long lost glory. This dazzling return shall be heralded by the emergence among the desert tribes, of a strange but very wicked moon faced clan. This moon faced clan would make war with the desert tribes, totally defeating them, while intending via subtle design, to purge them from the very face of the earth.

The day of emanation by this mighty empire from beyond would be heralded when this wicked moon faced tribe would cease in their war of extermination against the desert tribes, elevating the people and the heritage of these tribes high above even that of their own. Since these desert tribes had not forsaken their past, acknowledging the ancients in their ceremonies, customs, and history, while all others ceased; when this empire of the Star Children returned, they would elevate the desert tribes into a position of domination above all other mortals. It would be they, *The Children Of Heaven*, who would lead the earth into a new dazzling golden age, unlike any ever known before.

When the god-king of the Vandez finally died, in reverence he was buried in a secret chamber inside the tunnel complex beneath the *Grand Pyramid To The Supreme God* located somewhere inside the central plaza of the complex. While his pearl tinted sarcophagus of local marble sits in the center of this special chamber, the room is said to be covered in a nine inch thick layer of sparkling gold, harvested from inside the solar system of Ares.

The nine feet long corpse itself is said to be covered in garlands of gems shaped like flower blossoms. The feet are said to be adorned in shoes of translucent crystal. The head is said to be adorned by a spectacular diadem of diamond, pure gold, and countless gems. Thirty baskets of solid gold coins a

quarter inch thick, the size of doubloons, sit in equal numeric proportions around the sarcophagus, on all four sides.

The dream of every thief and adventurer from the farthermost days of antiquity, has been to discover this mysterious tomb from great antiquity. The problem for these speculators has always been to first locate the place and the temple, since the city was totally destroyed many years before. The place was literally transformed into a virtual squalor graveyard. The next problem was that the entire complex itself is literally honey-combed with a myriad of catacombs, to the extent that none left could recall the specific location of this supposed spectacular golden chamber.

The stranger was blessed. His grandfather was on good terms with the natives, who learned to adore them, as he had. One native, who according to tradition, had descended from a family of priests dedicated to the glorification of this ancient god-king. He had carried his grandfather and himself as a child, down into this fabled glorious chamber. He, himself, had actually laid eyes upon this spectacular sight destined to bedazzle the eyes, hearts, and minds of men ages henceforth. He was also granted special permission at the age of twelve, to enter inside this chamber by the old priest, in order than he might pay homage to this god-king of great renown. He returned inside the chamber only three times since. The final time was more than thirty years prior.

According to his guided discipline, should he forget the way into the chamber, instructions were chiseled into the wall at various points. His grandfather had written down these points on three separate sheets of vellum. One sheet was located at the vault in the local bank in *El Obregon.* Another inside a golden

chalice on the altar in the grand church at *Hildago*, and another at the bottom of a well by a peach orchard near the small village of *San Andrez*, just outside of Hildego.

Many kinds of people once knew his grandfather. These people included those among the best in status, the average people who were doing alright, and the worst among humanity. These people knew of his relationship with the old priest. His grandfather was also known for being an eccentric, never laboring, yet always having the best of whatever his heart desired most. He owned nothing, yet inexplicably always had a place to lay his head. He rode a beautiful quarter horse, with an extraordinarily expensive saddle no average man could ever afford. He always had food, even when it seemed he didn't have money. He never was seen to labor or even trade. Where was his secret stash, which obviously he had, if it were not found somewhere inside this fabled burial chamber? Then there was this strange aura of respect afforded unto him by the natives. Was it because of his exclusive knowledge?

Word in regard to this matter was circulated around for years. There could have been no doubt that the Coach Master in Durrango quickly connected his name with a request from Miguel for one who possessed possible knowledge of the location, on account of this talk. While the Coach Master was a double agent for the criminal underworld, he also gravitated to the highest bidder, being a victim to his own greed. This man never laid hands on connections with any of these criminal elements, he only moved people and materials, taking his own negotiated share of the pay out. He paid others to do the dirty work of laying hands onto any contraband, or these people paid him in advance to find a supply

of a specified item on their behalf. Once he moved it, the receptor paid him his due.

This man actually relished discovering these types, then being told to move a certain product that also happened to be the same being searched out. This way he could take a good hit on both ends of the bargain, creating his own debauched thrill in the same motion. Often people wound up perishing in these skillfully fore crafted schemes, but this fact of being didn't seem to particularly concern this man. In such a fashion, the Coach Master fetched a splendid living, while maintaining his complete cover simultaneously.

Another primary reason the Coach Master had not been arrested was that me man also informed law enforcement of occurrences in the dark underworld, of which it would have otherwise been impossible for them to ever know, from Reno and Virginia City, all the way down to Hildago and El Obregon. His information was highly trustworthy, when his requested amounts were planked down on the table before him. Tips greatly sealed his trustworthiness, based on the level of their generosity. Ironically the greatest fear of law enforcement was that this CM might be found out, and consequently eliminated. Who on earth then would take his place? From where would they harvest information in regard to clandestine movements in the dark underworld?

Otherwise this vast expanse of dangerous ungovernable territory was a no man's land, up for grabs by the strongest top gang or the highest bidder, who the common people of the area lived at the mercy of. Murder, extortion, sex slavery, prostitution, theft, loan sharking, kidnapping, slavery and exploitation of every stripe, was typical, and only a few scattered Marshall's and men like himself,

stood in their defense at a front line in what was amounting to being an outright war for everything ever held dear.

To be successful a precarious balance of maintaining relationships and serving one's own interests was absolutely vital in serving the people at large underneath these imposing circumstances. White hats and black ones were all too often exchanged, in order than an all encompassing positive end manifest from these expended efforts. This uncomfortable balance stood on a razors edge between literal concerns of life and death.

Such a calloused mentality was all these desperadoes comprehended anyway. In the end, any philosophical approach outside of brute force, was taken as being weakness, to the detriment of those standing on the sides of legality and respectful humanity at large. The individual agent riding forward into this battle for life needed always to maintain this final consideration, since no alternative option existed. Failing to do so would only mean certain death, then rendering even his best efforts useless to both himself and all others concerned.

When the thought entered into his mind, with a slight nudge from his heels his pony broke out into a full gallop. He was slightly passed time. He anticipated Miguel's agitation. Any extended dalliance would be construed with mistrust from Miguel. Already Angel bore a face of mistrust directed toward him, and he had met him only for the first time. The real show hadn't even commenced as of yet, and he had already profited by a crisp $2555.00. Great anticipation on his own part from comprehension, in what had previously been deduced as being hard truth, was what made any present effort expended all worth one's while.

Ahead when he rounded a roll in the desert land, the cottonwood oasis concealing the bunkhouse appeared seemingly from somewhere within the desert sands itself. He could give the devil credit where it was due, these criminals knew how to choose a great hiding place. Even when he entered into the oasis area, the old bunk house was not immediately in view. Tucked away inside a multitude of terrestrial land rolls was where it finally stood. A small creek even purled nearby on the backside most of the year, except during the hottest times. He galloped passed Angel standing on lookout, who instantly fired his pistol into the air. When he neared the camp the others were idly standing about, glancing with empty stunned faces over at Miguel, standing firm in their midst.

"You said nine O' clock high, so what is this?," Miguel spouted at him through tightly clenched teeth.

"I got all of your supplies," the stranger calmly replied. He untied the burlap sack from his saddle, then tossed it at Miguel's feet.

Angel suddenly raced up over the hill, pausing by the edge of the gathering.

"Well I'll be Goddamned again, if it ain't the mighty Captain Sands himself, come by to save the day for all us. Doesn't this constant supply of spectacular displays amaze all of you? What are we to make of it, boys? Wasn't this so nice of him?"

Angel grinned through clenched teeth as he paced around the stranger, glaring hard directly into his face.

"I got your number, buddy, and don't you ever forget that," he spoke to him on a low breath.

Angel nodded his head in the silent stranger's direction, as he made his way back over toward the gathering by the morning fire.

Chapter Five

They Pull Out

Miguel's sun blackened face and neck slowly turned toward the stranger. Where his large Stetson hat sat was almost white as snow from being constantly shaded, and his thinning gray hair.

"You know, I myself would love to squabble about you being some two hours late," then he turned toward the gathered group as he stepped backwards slightly, "but we haven't the time. This show needs to get on the road, and soon. I am tempted, just as everybody else is, to ask what your problem was, but we simply don't have time to make of it. Honestly, Sands, I do have a bad feeling about it, but I just don't have time to ask any questions today."

Miguel stooped while picking up the burlap bag to open it, then dumped the requested items on the ground before him. He smiled broadly as the newly purchased items rolled out. These he carefully picked back up, one by precious one, placing them back inside the bag. The group scurried around loading up saddle bags and a small two wheeled supply wagon. This light portable device even had a four feet high water proof cover, making it perfect for supplies of every stripe. Their only concern primarily at this time of the year out in the

desert, was morning and evening dew, since rain was increasingly getting rare as hen's teeth. Finally everything was loaded up and ready to move out. Miguel turned to glare hard at the stranger, betraying an aura of silent mistrust.

"Now, if I am right, Sands, you said our target was due north of here, on the same side of the boulder as the rock tripe grows, then eastbound over by the little mestizo village at El Jezereal, right?"

"Sure," spoke the stranger, "but that depends on where it is you want to wind up at."

"What do you mean, here? We are heading to the Vandez!," fired Miguel.

"Well, we need to swing eastward from here, rather than go northbound directly. We'll bypass El Jezereal all together."

Miguel flew into a composure of sudden rage, then suddenly calmed into complete control.

"You never said that earlier on, but we'll take your advice on the matter, since the CM at Durrango assured me you were the man who has the skills we are so desperately needing in this venture. Should you ever double cross me, Sands, you'll live to regret it. I can tell you that much!"

The stranger smiled from his seat upon the stallion's back, then spat black juice onto the ground beside him.

"You keep on movin' em out, and I'll keep on showin' all of you just where you can all go!," he replied somewhat laconically.

Gradually the troop moved on out. Miguel's anger slowly cooled, although he still possessed an aura of powerful mistrust directed toward the stranger. The original intent was to move out before the sun rose directly overhead. The

morning time tends to be cooler, consequently facilitating brisk travel while keeping the sun directly in the eyes of pursuers, if all was organized to accommodate this natural state of being. All of them were careful to fill their canteens in the small creek running behind the rather dilapidated bunk house. An old wooden beer keg with a bottom faucet sufficed for a water cooler. This they carried along in the small pull wagon with their heavier gear such as a couple of Maddox, ax, shovel, some canvas, blankets, and other items anticipated as being needed.

They were moving along in a far eastward direction for a couple of hours by now. According to sun time, they exited out into the desert by 1100. Adding two more hours meant that according to sun time, it was one O’ clock high. The desert sun was cooking mercilessly. The men barely even uttered a word as they rode along upon their horses, each person appearing as if he would literally melt. The horses would snort in their own attempts to fight the heat and a potential for exhaustion.

“I never knew how good a tin cup filled with water from a gurgling creek might taste until now,” Angel spoke through a firm face, though one well taken care of, strangely enough. The sun tanned him a ruddy leathery color, allowing his pale blue eyes to radiate fiercely from inside his deeply set eye sockets. He always gave an appearance of gritting his teeth, being caught up in waves of anger and resentment. His body was well toned. He seemed as if he was one who seldom paused, and when he did he wasn’t contented. Certainly a lifetime of criminal activity would have never allowed it.

“I know somewhere there has to be good water nearby. In hot late spring weather a moving horse needs to water, ever two and a half to three hours. What about it Sands, there? Good trip coordinators know these types of details, and plan for it in anticipation.”

He turned backward, gazing upon the stranger with a hard glare. He suddenly began to smile while appearing to grit his teeth, rendering a feeling of antagonism back toward the stranger.

“Do you like playing caboose? I have noticed how no matter what, you are virtually *always* the last car on this train! You do this consistently Sands.”

He turned back around to glare with a broad grin back toward the others, then snapped back around.

“I saw it around the camp fire when you first rode up. I saw it when we were gathering supplies. When we pulled out I noticed it. We’ve been around a few bends already, and I still don’t see any voluntary actions on your part to lead the fore!”

The group continued on, still eastbound, while the sun baked seemingly with more intensity. A large jackrabbit hopped from around a boulder. A sidewinder zigzagged suddenly in the scorching desert sands. In the distance looms a large saguaro cacti. Some outside the area have said these never grow in Mexico, but few have ever traveled through this specific part. A dog sized coyote suddenly streaks from the large cactus, toward the rabbit, snatching the poor rabbit up as he screams to escape his fate. Instantly the stranger draws his pistol and shoots, bringing the coyote down with a single reverberating shot.

The shot catches the group by complete surprise. None saw it coming. The stranger eases off his horse, then gradually ambles toward the coyote, pulling his side knife, then stooping as he proceeds to skin his head. In five brisk minutes he returns to his horse, carrying both the scalp and the rabbit. As he is walking along he pauses as the snake winds at the summit of a large sand dune to his left. He stomps his foot and the snake raises his head. He drops the rabbit and draws his pistol in the same motion, shooting the snake's head off.

The stranger stoops to pick up the rabbit, then eases along to where the snake lay, twitching in convulsions. He drops his kill of the rabbit and the coyote scalp, stooping to pick up the snake. He draws his knife and has the snake skinned in what seemed like two minutes time. In what seemed as no time at all, he is back to his horse, dropping the coyote scalp, the rabbit, and the snake skin into an extra gunny sack tied onto the saddle bag.

"My oh my," announced the voice of Angel seeming to shatter the prevailing silence, "I do wish you boys would just look at that."

"Twenty seven O five," the stranger mumbled as he eased back into his saddle.

Angel began laughing loudly and uncontrollably. The desert wind picked up in a short gust.

"Now fellow, none of us planned on any huntin' trip. Not on this outing, I'm sorry to have to inform you. I don't mix pleasure with business. Never have and never will," roared Miguel.

Angel burst out in laughter once more again.

"Well, whats the solid score for rabbit, Sands? Would it be twenty? Might it be fifty?

He roared in laughter again. “But that’s right, you didn’t even kill the rabbit, the coyote did, right?

“Hell, people must be givin’ ‘em away! What a you think about it Sands?”

“Think its time to keep moving out,” the stranger replied.

“Hey Miguel, Rolf, now the dude here thinks its time to be pullin’ out again!”

Angel burst out laughing.

“Can you believe that? Can you just believe that?,” he said repeatedly.

Angel continued laughing, as Miguel nudged his horse. Soon the troop followed with their pull along pony, their wagon, and their horses tromping along. When the wind puffed again it seemed to carry along with it the sound and smell of fresh flowing water. Ahead there was a small hill. When the horse’s ears suddenly stood up, the stranger knew it was for sure.

“We’ll strike camp just over that hill yonder, Miguel!,” he said.

Miguel turned over his left shoulder to view the sun in its relationship to the sky and the horizon. It seemed to stand at about 1600 high. When the troop crested the hill, a creek purled maybe seventy five yards out. A string of shady cotton and willow trees ran on either side of the creek. Wild plum grew in scattered places, here and there.

“We’ll strike camp there on the small hill in the shade on this side of the creek there. We want to camp up from the water a ways. Once we get our tents pitched for the evening, and get set up, we can move on over to the creek for a drink and to let our horses cool off. A bit of graze for them will be nice to boot,”he said with firmness in his voice.

The men were so thirsty it didn't seem like it took no time to set up the tents. The air all around the creek felt as if it were cooling. When the chores were completed all of them raced down to the tinkling water, rushing in fully clothed, grabbing the water up with both cupped hands, voraciously throwing it into their faces and refilling their canteens until they were overflowing.

After they all had played for a bit, they stepped back out onto the bank where their horses were tied onto the trunks of standing trees, untied them; then led them directly into the water, where they waded and drank until their hearts contentment. The horses also grazed on the fresh green grass growing on the creek bank. Angel suddenly turned back around after not saying much for awhile since they had found water.

"Well I'll be damned, just when we all thought you might have forgotten, you did come through after all. Sometimes a man just sees what needs doin', and he does it like that."

The stranger sighed deeply as he gazed all around him in the lightly puffing wind.

"Yeah Angel, you're right. Sometimes a man just sees what needs doin' and he up and does it, just like that."

The stranger smiled as he walked around the man they call Angel, who followed him along with his eyes, suddenly exploding into laughter. The stranger walks over to where the others stood on the creek bank, then assisted them in gathering their clothes and packing up their goods into the horses saddle bags. In the distance by the creek, Angel still howled with laughter.

By the time the group pulled away from the creek, with their fill of water to include the horses, the evening had commence to wane. While the others were moving back and forth from inside their tents, the stranger made his way to the pull wagon, getting out some beans, some biscuit flour, and some salt pork. The beans, onions, and salt pork he dropped into a heavy cast iron dutch oven.

In a cast iron pan skillet he placed a cut of pork fat, which soon melted down into useful lard grease. As it melted he retrieved the rabbit he has slain earlier on, skinned it, then began frying it up in the pan grease. Carefully he reloaded his revolver, spinning it until it snapped as he was eyeing it down the barrel out over the desert toward the mountains on the far horizon. A small puff of wind moved through the camp, sweeping a slight stir of sand out toward the desert vastness beyond. The others stepped back outside from their tents.

“Son, you have to give that man credit when he deserves it, his cookin’ sure smells good this evening,” said Rolf. “All of you can say what else you want to about him.”

“Yeah, he’s nice like that when he feels he needs to be. I’ve noticed that a long time ago,” smiled Angel as he grins, speaking through clenched teeth.

“Well he’s always been nice to me,” spoke up Santiago to the stranger’s defense.

Miguel gazed around as the wolves and the coyotes began howling in the distance. He turned back around toward the stranger, holding his gaze and narrowing his eyes. A scratch and a scramble came from the distance out from where the stranger sat, frying the rabbit in lard grease. The stranger grabbed the revolver with his right hand, laying it on his knee. Suddenly a blast and a

yelp echoed over the vast desert plains. When they strained their ears it seemed to both Miguel and Angel they could hear him mumble “twenty eight hundred ‘n five.” Then another shot and a loud yelp followed, “twenty nine hundred ‘n five.” Then another shot and a piercing yelp echoed out.

“Yep, make that three thousand ‘n five,” the stranger’s voice carrying backward on the wind seemed to saying.

The four observers never said a single work, they only sat motionlessly, watching. The stranger walked over to where two coyotes and a wolf was laying as if in deep slumber. He pulled his side knife, removing the scalps in what appeared as a single effortless motion. When the stranger walked back toward his horse, Miguel and the others met him where his horse was tied.

“What in the name of God are you doing, Sands?,” thundered Miguel, “ I told you before, for the love of Pete, this is no huntin’ trip. We are on business, and I don’t believe in mixing business with pleasure.”

The stranger tied his bag where he kept the wolf and coyote scalps, without ever making a reply.

“Yeah, we’re on business,” he finally replied without pausing.

Miguel walked over toward the stranger as he labored by his horse with his back turned. He grabbed the stranger on the shoulder with his right hand, who snapped around in a near instant.

“Look Sands, we’re gonna get somthin’ straight, right here and now. I don’t know what kind of game it is you’re playin’, but you had damn well be for real. That’s my personal, man to man warning, here and now, directly to you.”

The stranger forced himself to smile, then replied;

“Oh sir, I’m for real. Just as real as the sand, the night, and that coffin I know you are after so.” He smiled smoothly as he spoke.

The others gathered around the camp fire eating the beans and pork, already cooked up a plate of biscuits. A silence fell upon the camp as Angel picked up a rear leg of the fried rabbit from the skillet, placing it on the plate with the biscuits. He suddenly exploded into heaving laughter as he also tore a fore leg from the rabbit, while gazing directly at the stranger as he and Miguel filled their own tin plates. He nearly chocked when he ripped a mouth full from the rabbit’s crisp leg bone, continuing to laugh hysterically as he chewed the tasty flesh. The stranger and Miguel never spoke a single word.

The stranger and the others spoke small talk that evening around the fire. Even Angel appeared more affable as the group consumed the food. In the starlit desert distance the coyotes and wolves kept up their howling. Dry twigs snapped very lightly, seemingly one light incident after another. These very delicate snapping sounds seemed to emanate from a variety of sources, some slight distance from another. A couple of tied horses snorted. Their ears seemed to flicker, as the animals stood nearly motionlessly while being silhouetted in the dimming evening light. Every man in the group glanced around, rifles and pistols were cautiously being filled with ammunition.

“How far away did you say earlier on that this place, Vandez, was Sands?,” asked the long haired, but very practical minded Rolf.

“Oh, maybe a day, maybe a day and a half,” the stranger replied smoothly as he relaxed back onto a natural pile of rocks.

Rolf paused, gazing out into space momentarily, then turning to face the stranger again.

“But I’m just not gettin’ somethin’ here Sands. You said it was only half a days ride before we left out yesterday.”

“Nobody can be absolutely sure all the time,” replied the stranger.

“And we’re still east bound here, right Sands?,” Rolf asked.

“Last time I paid any thought to the matter, we were,” replied the stranger.

“Well that’s strange, don’t you think, now boys? He also told us only yesterday that this place was due north, hard line due north. Now we’re traveling east bound?,” roared Rolf, while gazing around hard at Miguel and Angel. No remark from either ensued.

“Well, I can tell you all, this man here knows where it is he is taking us,” assured the young Santiago. He knows what he is doin’. You can count on that much, mates.”

No remark came from the others in response.

“Look here,” roared Rolf again.

He picked up a dried twig from the ground, then drew a strait line. He drew circle at one end of the line.

“This represents Vandez, where it is we are goin’. This represents where we began in this journey,” he said, stabbing the stick down on the opposite end of the line. He then began drawing a line outward, to the right side.

“This represents where we have been going. I have been noticing by keeping an eye out on our position, by that of the sun and the mountains surrounding us, where we have been literally circling.”

He continued to draw the line in a circle until he reached a point where he was even with the point representing Valdez.

“My personal belief is that we will be even with Valdez, in no more than two hours travel time tomorrow. I can only assume he told us the truth yesterday, when he claimed we were only a day’s ride from this place.”

The others never replied.

“That’s why you have to listen to me, now isn’t it?,” suddenly interrupted the stranger. “We don’t yet have all the details as to where we are headed. Plus, all of us are low on cash, right? The town of El Obregon is up ahead, maybe two hours ride. I am going to make my own hold up, on behalf of our company here. The banker-man there owes me a personal favor anyway.”

“A smooth hundred would be nice, right about now for me,” mumbled Rolf.

“We’ll test him,” said Angel suddenly. “I’ve been dyin’ to myself, to be honest about everything.”

Rolf glared hard directly into the eyes of the stranger, without cracking a smile.

“What about two hundred for me here, and the same for the boy there,” he said as he began licking his lips nervously.

“Don’t speak for me, I don’t need a damn thing here,” the young Santiago replied’.

“Well how much you got there?,” Angel roared without moving his face from the stranger’s, while cutting his eyes sharply to the left in the boy’s direction, and to the right, directly back in the stranger’s eyes.

“I got a full ten dollar bill, I’ll have ya to know, there Angel” Santiago replied.

Angel cut his eyes sharply from the boy back over to the those of the stranger.

“Ten dollars! Well hell, boy,” he said with a nervous expression on his face, “that much ain’t even enough to get a dip stick shinned up from them high class doves in El Obregon there.”

He burst out laughing hysterically again.

“Hell, it’ll take at least fifty for that. Then any good man is gonna want a cut O’ that roast, and there goes his other fifty. A bottle O’ good eastern made bourbon, a hair cut, a shave.. Hell, I figure no less than two hundred there boy!,” fired Angel while glancing hard at the stranger, who made no reply nor displayed any emotion.

Angel’s eyes flicked back and forth from the boy, to the stranger, and downward, rather nervously.

“Two hundred it is then, for you and the boy,” replied the stranger.

Angel burst out onto laughter. His eyes flicked back and forth from the face of the stranger, to the youth, then outward toward the others in the group.

“Is that all? Is that the best that you kin do? What about Miguel? You are not going to leave the man out there, are you?

There was a pause where nothing more was spoken. Angel eventually exploded into laughter again.

“And only one hundred just ain’t cuttin’ it, this day and time, for poor ole Rolf, there, Sands.”

Angel’s eyes remained fixated upon the stranger steadfast, without nothing being said.

“Two hundred it is, then,” replied the stranger.

Angel burst into raging laughter.

“So let me get this right, here. That’s two hundred for you, two hundred for the boy, two hundred for Rolf, and two hundred for Miguel, eh?”

“Seems perfectly fair enough!,” the stranger spoke slowly and void of any emotion.

Angel again roared with laughter to the point he was all over himself.

“Let me see here now, that comes out to.., four hundred a piece, right?,” asked the stranger calmly.

“All day long, last time I counted and added up numbers,” replied Angel, who then fell all over himself with laughter.

“So that figures up to two hundred for the each of you.., and three hundred for me,” replied the stranger with a calm firmness.

Angel’s face suddenly dried up and his lunatic laughter ceased.

“Hugh?,” he grunted.

“Yep, that’s right. Three hundred for me, nothing more, nothing less,” spoke the stranger as he made his way over toward his pup tent. “After all, I am the one committing this crime, and all of you are the innocent bystanders.”

On the edge of day break the group awoke. Before bedding down they made the effort to gather in their belongings, carefully packing them away. Fat, cat head biscuits filled with salt port, were wrapped up in a greasy red bandanna, sitting, waiting on them. The stranger stepped on up to the coffee pot by the fire, poured in measured cup fulls of water and coffee grounds, then sat the pot by the fire pit, carefully stirring the remaining coals from last nights fire. The others stretched and buttoned their pants as they walked up.

In no time they all drank down their two cups a piece. The fire was outed, their tents soon packed with everything else loaded, and the group was riding out. As they rode along in the morning, even the warm desert sun felt really pleasant. Nothing was better than being alive and free, each person thought in silence to himself. The stranger took out a pinch of tobacco plug and began chewing slowly. By the time the desert brightened up in the passing of morning, in the distance they could make out the boundaries of a town settlement. Angel snapped around, facing the stranger as they rode along.

“Looks like you are about to face your big test, on to a courtesy of the good gang here, Sands.”

Angel roared with laughter after making his address. “Are you still up to it? Don’t you dare let us down now,” he continued to rage. “Hell boy,” he struggled to announce as he spoke, “ we don’t even have a decent name here for your gang. What a ya say, uh? What about the Doolottie Gang?

He burst out in laughter again.

“Or does the Do Little Gang sound better. I think at this point that name would be more fitting.”

Angel continues to rage with laughter. Miguel turned around to face Angel with a hard glare.

“But that’s right, we got Sands here and he knows the deal, the real deal, and we can never go wrong for sure, with him,” he said with affirmation in his voice

The stranger eased over to spit the black tobacco juice onto the ground as Angel continued roaring with laughter. Soon they were entering El Obregon, riding passed Dowless’s Dry Goods Store and the Marshall’s station, who seemed

to be out, two more trading depots.., and then the bank. The stranger suddenly maintained a composure of complete control.

“Look,” the stranger spoke to the others, “you boys take your stations around here with the bank in mind, while I go inside and make the hit. I’m going to try and be smooth as silk about it, without even firing a single shot, So bear with me.”

The others took their cover between the stores, behind small storage sheds, tying their horses to dried fallen driftwood logs scattered all about for some unknown reason. The stranger tied his horse on the log rail in front of the town bank. He grabbed the bag containing the wolf and coyote scalps, then walked up the steps, and on inside.

“What’s the latest news, Chester?,” he asked to the banker as he walked inside.

A nervous look of great apprehension materialized over the face of the banker. He seemed to have thinned greatly since the last time the stranger laid eyes on him. Even his hair had thinned a bit in the front, forming what all the cowboys profanely referred to as *thigh marks*. Only his coal black mustachio seemed to have mysteriously thickened.

“El Rodadora stormed in here just over a month ago. They took fifteen thousand American dollars worth in golden Spanish doubloon. They also held up a Wells Fargo stage coach out on the desert road, going northbound. Their total take between us and the WF coach was equal to fifty thousand American, in golden coin,” he struggled to say as he gasped the words.

“Did you speak to the Marshall in regard to this matter, Chester?,” asked the stranger.

“Sure did, he assured me these villains would be hunted down relentlessly, and apprehended. He mentioned that I would be visited by a man called Ringo Arenas. We’ve met only a time or two in the past, but my gut informed me you were who he was speaking of,” replied the banker.

“Did he leave anything for me?,” asked the stranger.

“He sure did. Step over with me to the vault.”

The stranger stepped behind the counter, and the two moved on into a room located in the back side of the bank. Carefully the banker opened the heavy door of the vault. He grabbed up a fist sized cloth sack filled with the jingle of few coins as the banker moved, and a sealed envelope. The banker handed them over to the stranger.

“He told me to give you this when you arrive. This little sack here is two thousand, American, in solid gold Spanish coin; doubloons, if I am not mistaken. This is payment in advance for going after this gang on our behalf. He also wanted you to have this.”

The banker tossed over a few carefully folded bills.

“These bills represent a thousand broken up into hundreds. This is play money while you are in town. Play money is intended to be kept separate from labor wages,” the helpful banker intimated.

The stranger received the bills, then casually tuned to exit the bank.

“Oh, and one more thing,” spoke the banker. “The gang has pledged to return today, around high noon. They are planning a final attack, with it being centered

around the bank here, Ringo. Can you believe these people really are brazen enough to have spoken these intentions aloud? That bit of information might come in handy, I figure."

"Thanks, I'll certain keep it in mind today while I am in town. They could have also been scheming to set a trap by announcing that. Oh, and there is one more thing here, while I am at it. Is there still a market around for wolf and coyote scalps?," the stranger asked.

"Always. Tell you what, you give them to me, and I'll pay you for them now, and we'll call it even."

"Deal done," replied the stranger as he handed the bag to him. The banker dumped the three scalps out, tretrieving three crisp hundred dollar bills, which he promptly handed over to the stranger, who took them.

"Thanks Chester."

The stranger turned and headed on back out with his empty bag in hand, toward his tied horse. He tied the gunny bag back onto his saddle, dropping the coin bag inside his left saddle bag, then took the play bills and headed to where his scattered men were hiding. All four men raced up eagerly, with their hands held out.

"I'll be damned! Boys, here I must say! How do you always manage to do such things?," asked Angel as he glared hard at the stranger.

"Two for you," he said as he shucked out the bills, and laid them in the opened hand of Rolf.

"Two for you," He slowly laid the bills in Miguel's hand.

"Two for you," he laid the bills in Santiago's hand.

“And., that’s two for you,” he said as he laid the bills in the opened hand of Angel.

“Well that’s mighty white of you there, shuckin’ all those handy bills out to us poor folks like that,” smiled Angel in dark sarcasm to the stranger. “And all fresh, right from the bank like that! What amazes me most of all in this great take, is where we heard no gun shots. So how did ya pull this one off Sands?”

Four horses with riders wearing large sombreros suddenly galloped up, two on either side of the bank. These men raced into the front door of the bank, with six shooters blazing. An unannounced shot gun blast from the banker sent two of them rolling out onto the front porch, sprawled out spread eagle on their backs, appearing as if they had been dropped from above. The other two kept shooting directly into the bank. Two more raced up from behind the bank. The stranger leveled his pistol, shooting twice in back to back repetition, killing two almost side by side.

“That’s some fine shootin’ there for a desert drifter,” spoke Miguel to the stranger.

The two gangsters took cover and began trading shots. Rolf fired, bringing one down by the side of the street out front of the bank. The other took off running in between the bank and a building beside it.

“Let this one be mine,” spoke Miguel as he he leveled off his pistol, taking careful aim as the young boy raced with all his might. While the boy was climbing onto his horse, Miguel thundered with his 38 caliber,, and the boy crumpled back onto the ground beside the horse.

“That’s some fine shootin’ for a common criminal,” spoke the stranger to Miguel.

Miguel never replied, he only shrugged his shoulders.

“So what ’ll we do now?”

“Tell ya what, since you have worked so hard today for your pay. Why don’t you and the boys ride due north from here, to the first creek you come to that crosses the road. The law will be here soon, and I somehow just don’t think it will be good for you and the boys to remain.”

“We’ll do!,” Miguel raced out whistling and waving. “Time to move on out from here, boys!”

The four soon leaped onto the backs of their horses, racing on out of town, and out of sight. The stranger made his way back into the bank, where the banker stood panting in a combination of exhaustion, rage, and outright terror.

“You alright?,” asked the stranger.

“Yeah, shook up a bit. What about you?”

“Fine, but could I ask a favor?,” the stranger inquired.

“Anytime, its on the house,” gasped the banker as he bent over.

“Could you help me gather up those bodies and put them over by the Marshall’s office?”

“No problem,” replied the banker, “the work ’ll do me good right about now. I tell you what, you give me the price for the bounty and I’ll pay your tend, since the Marshall is out of town right now.”

“Three thousand a head,” relied the stranger.

“There are six, so that makes a cool eighteen thousand, American, in golden Spanish coin.”

“All day long,” smiled the stranger laconically.

He and the banker labored for an hour and the six dead men were laid out, all in a side by side row , facing up, out by the porch on the Marshall’s office building. The banker disappeared back into the bank for ten minutes, soon returning by the Marshall’s office. He reached into his apron pocket, laying hand on a cloth bag of coins, presenting it with a smile to the stranger. The stranger carefully counted the coin, then seated himself upon his horse, nodding good bye to the banker, and moving on out.

“I’ll be sure to tell the Marshall you dropped by to lend a hand in this mess,” the banker yelled as the stranger rode away in the same direction of his crew.

As the stranger left the town limits he passed by the two story hotel, with the second story balcony. Out on the balcony sat the well dressed dancing girls, who waved heartily. The voice of the one they called Queen Jezebel, with the massively large bosom, soon rang throughout the air.

“My oh my ladies, there Mr. tall, long green, rides passed us once more again! I must say there, Mr., that sure was some mighty fine shootin!”

The stranger kept on riding passed without ever glancing up to notice. A young female voice suddenly rang out above the chattering laughter of the other girls.

“Yeah girls, I bet good Mr. Long Green ridin’ yonder, can throw that long dong just as straight, firm, and steady as he can shoot, too!”

The whole crowd of bar room Can-Can girls clapped and cheered with fresh vibrancy.

“It wont cost ya but a hundred dollars, baby!,” rang the shrill voice of another. “And I’d personally like a taste of every flavor for the only same price.”

“On credit baby!,” the calm stranger finally replied as he rode passed, “on credit!”

He rode passed while keeping directly on the trail leading back outward into the desert beyond. As it wound on outside the town limits, it narrowed. An unusually large, three feet diameter cotton tree shaded a corner where he thought he would allow his horse to relax a bit before moving on. He made his way over to the back side of the tree. On the trunk of the tree was nailed a large wanted poster. In perfect Spanish with a clear English translation, were written these words above weathered, but fully recognizable black and white photographs;

El banda rodonte de rodadores. Buscadas viva o muertas! Recompenza por cabeza, seiz mil dolares, estadunidense!

The Rolling Tumbleweed Gang. Wanted dead or alive! Bounty per head, six thousand dollars, American!

Chapter Six

The Magic Key

An hour and a half later the stranger rode up to where the others paused at the edge of a creek flowing across the small winding rutted path out in the middle of the desert. Out of the four, Rolf wore a look of outright puzzlement on his face. Santiago sit on a thick flat rock, bearing an appearance of complete astonishment. Miguel bore a composure of hard-fixed plans and raw determination. Only Angel exploded with a hyena like cackle, having a few words of satirical greetings for the stranger. He shook his head from side to side as he simultaneously glared.

“I swear Sands, you beat all. I find it strange that you seem to always come through on the last minute, at times when all alternative choices are simply not around for any of us to make.,” he scowled hard as he smiled.

The stranger said nothing in return.

“So what are we to make of this?,” Angel fired with a sudden hard face, glancing around at the others wearing a sardonic smile, and shrugging his shoulders.

The stranger still said nothing.

A pause in time ensured where Angel and the stranger simply glowered at one another. Angel suddenly exploded into his irking form of laughter again.

“Alright! Alright! You came through with the money you promised. I’ll give you credit for that much. My gut is warning me, however, for some reason I have yet to explain,” he paused as he continued to scowl. “ To put it honest for some reason, Sands, I just don’t trust you!”

The stranger made no reply, only sat upon his horse observing the revelations before him in silence.

Angel burst into his agitating laughter again.

“Alright! Enough! Enough! So what now?,” Angel asked.

Angel then turned toward the others.

“Where is Captain Nobody here going to take us to next? Has anybody dared to ask him that? Why doesn’t somebody around here dare to ask him specifically what his game is? What?,” Angel shrugged, “ Are these blank looks all I can get from you around here? Don’t you feel like you are expendable pawns in some grandiose type of chess game?”

Miguel suddenly walked up.

“Enough of this foolishness around here, men! None of us have time for it. Like I have said so many times before in the past, we all need to build a fire under our own ass! Can’t any of you see? We can all play after the work is done.”

Angel burst into his lunatic chuckle again.

“We all have work to do, and time is running out,” Miguel continued. “ He was sent to me by Mitch Wiseman, the Coach Master from Durrango, Angel. I told you that much way back over at the bunk house. I’ve been working for Wiseman a long time, and Wiseman knows who he sends,” informed Miguel, “inside and out. That’s why I like doing business with this man, he’s a virtual master mind in what he does. He knows his shit, and specifically who it is having stink on his hands, and specifically how much, and most importantly of all, whether or not we have anything to be concerned about. I like that in him, myself!”

“Is that so?,” snarled Angel, “is it really so ole Wiseman knows who he sends? Well how much of a fee did he charge to send good ole Sands here to you?”

“A hundred Spanish doubloons,” returned Miguel.

“A hundred sandwich doubloons?,” fired Angel with a hardening face, as he continued to glower directly at the stranger.

“Golden doubloons, Spanish golden doubloons!,” Miguel fired with a firm hardening, agitated face.

“Is that so? Now tell me, is that much really so?,” gasped Angle as he glared directly at Miguel now, in the same look of dark sarcasm he held for the stranger. “If Sands here could have been bought with a hundred golden doubloons, then what kind of monster could somebody else buy for two hundred golden doubloons, or even three hundred? Tell me that much, Miguel? Have you even given this serious matter at hand here any realistic thought?”

“Enough of this foolish talk. Lets get on with it,” roared Miguel.

Angel roared in his iconic laughter of disbelief, as was becoming to his personal style.

“Where to next?,” asked Santiago, with a child’s yearning for excitement.

“Hildago!,” the stranger said above all the uproar and camp chatter.

“And what, pray tell, is in Hildago besides an old cathedral church?,” roared Rolf who had only been standing idle, cautiously observing.

“That’s right, you heard the man, we’re all goin’ to church,” replied the stranger almost as if in jest. “All of you dirty, rotten, theivin’, lyin’ sinners could need a bit of prayer and a few good blessings. Besides, and while all of you newly restored folks are being blessed, the bad boy in me causes a certain particular elegant chalice to be of a special interest.”

Miguel gazed hard directly at the stranger with narrowing hardening eyes, then snapped back around at the others.

“You heard him? Lets move on. I have been assured by good people and for good money, where this man knows what he speaks of. To be honest, however, I have questioned him myself, but then I have to let past experience lead through with confidence and direction,” Miguel spoke aloud to the other men. He then turned around to the stranger, speaking in lower tones, “Just as long as they get theirs and I get mine, we can all then be much calmer and content with our surroundings.”

“Be patient old man, you’ll find your coffin,” curtly replied the stranger.

He eased on passed Miguel who was frozen solid at his words, toward his stallion tied to the side of the gathered group. The others scattered about getting

belongings together, packed on their horses, then saddling up. Soon the gang was moving onward, winding with the trail in a northbound curvature.

“How far away is this town from where we are?,” asked Santiago.

“Oh, about four hours ride,” replied the stranger.

Rolf glanced at the sun which was at the 1400 position.

“We might better get a move on, then. With steady riding we might get there by six.”

“But this time of the year we’ll still have two good hours left. We’ll still have plenty of time to do what e’er it is we need to do,” informed Santiago with the obvious mannerism of an inexperienced adult or even a child.

“That’s right, boy. I can see you’re catching on fast,” replied the stranger, as the group began riding out.

The winding road through the desert made its way over dunes, passed abandoned Indian camps, and large areas covered in prickly pear cacti. Here and there a huge snake would wind it’s way through the sand, a coyote would zip from cactus to cactus, or a small hungry wolf pack would dodge along through the terrain outward from them as it followed along. Here and there a shot would ring out, startling the others, who would turn suddenly only to observe the stranger picking off a wolf, a coyote, a snake, and on one occasion, a full grown mountain lion. There seemed to have been no more than six shots fired.

All of these he scalped, except the snakes and the huge cat. These he skinned, being careful to keep the snake meat and the cat’s head. Out in the desert sun the meat dried rather quickly. Even the cats head preserved itself a bit. As he walked out the others imagined the wind carrying his words, and he could faintly

be heard mumbling “21100, 21200, 21300, 21400, 21500. Oh, and this one is for just being the right person at the right time.”

Miguel only shook his head from side to side, saying nothing, glaring seemingly with great intuition. Santiago glared with amazement while the stranger crammed the newly collected items into his saddle bags and carry along burlap sacks, yet somehow he seemed as if he was hesitating to speak, but simply could no longer forbear.

“We get the other things, but what about the cat? You saved the hide and the head. What’s up with that? I don’t get it, and neither does anybody else,” the youth finally pushed himself to ask.

“Oh, lets say its just a special gift for a special friend. We do these kinds of things when they seem to always come along at just the right time, especially at times when they are needed most,” the stranger calmly replied, “and it is not nice for us to ever forget who our real friends are now.”

The group rode farther along the old trader’s winding path through the desert. There wasn’t much to see this deep into the cacti wilderness. Thoughts were already passing through the heads of Rolf and Santiago, not to mention Angel, in regard to whether they wanted to even continue along on the journey. Only Miguel was convinced to the absolute, and dead determined to proceed onward, regardless.

“How many are lookin’ for ya, Miguel?,” asked the stranger rather laconically, yet quietly, keeping the question from the group.

“You mind your business, and I’ll mind mine,” fired Miguel. “We can talk when the job at hand is done.”

Eventually the group made their way to a hill overlooking a deep valley shaped like a huge cup out in the desert. From the height of the hill and the vast flatness of the sands, the sight of a town lay immediately ahead. From the center of the old Spanish town, loomed a rather large mission the men called a cathedral. Periodically what must have been a sizable bell, knelled a ring carried on the gentle desert wind to the ears of the gang as they stood on the hill observing.

“Well, there it is, boys, and she is callin’ ya home,” said the stranger with a sly quiet smile to the gang positioned around him.

“It looks like a place where we might be able get cozy and set a spell,” announced Rolf.

The others chuckled as they smiled in the puffing wind toward the desert distance where the town sat.

“Now, now, boys, lets be nice,” spoke the stranger. “We are all about to go to church. My gut feeling is that all of you might need to go to church. Some, no doubt, much more so than others.”

The gang slowly made their way off the hill, moving on toward the town in the valley below. The sun was going down, although there was plenty of daylight remaining. The time seemed to be about perfect for entering. As they neared the main street, numerous chickens raced from them as they moved along. A goose honked loudly, fluttering her wings rather viciously. People stood along the streets on both sides, glowering at them hard as they passed. The women appeared to be dedicated housewives, and all the men appeared to be hard working husbands. There was a dry goods store, a medicine shop, a designer

clothing shop, a bank, and a local policeman's office building; but no saloons, and not one bordello.

The mission bell's ring suddenly filled the air of the town. The people scattered. The gang made their way toward the front door, tying their horses out front, then easing on inside. Once inside the main foyer they were greeted by the bishop donning a sable gown, and his assistants. The stranger informed him they would like to enter into the prayer chapel. The bishop respectfully nodded his approval.

Once the gang was settled inside the prayer chapel, one of the assistants approached the stranger with a small note pad and a pencil. He glanced down at the note, reading where it asked for his name. He carefully penned his name, returning it back to the assistant, who dutifully carried it back into the foyer.

In five minutes the assistant returned with another note. The stranger glanced down at the note which informed him to step back into the foyer, the bishop would like to speak with him. The stranger arose quietly, making his way toward the foyer. When he entered inside the bishop stood there waiting patiently.

"Sir, soon as I saw your name, your father's face came to mind. I knew your father very well back in his day. It's been a long time, my dear son," the bishop said to him as he hugged him.

"Indeed its been awhile," replied the stranger, "too long I might add."

"Your father was a wise man, an adventurer at heart, a business man. I am not aware as to how rich he ever was, but then, wealth doesn't make a man, does it?"

"My father was very wealthy in experience, sir, but I might add in as well, where gold lead him to it."

The bishop glanced in his direction, with a smug smile.

“I know the Marshall in El Obregaon. I know the one in El Jezere. I am on good terms with the authority in most of Sierra Province at large here. I am well aware of the problems all of us are dealing with throughout this entire territorial region at large. You know, the battle being waged against wickedness is an on going one, unfortunately.”

The stranger sighed,

“Unfortunately,” he replied.

“Your father was a good man, a man of the cloth and the book, son. I like that quality and take it to heart. Frequently he came in here to pray. He confessed his every sin and transgression unto me, with complete confidence. He gave freely unto the poor and the temple of God. Behind these doors he was always welcome and could always find shelter and comfort here, when no other existed anywhere else. I haven’t seen him in a long while, now. How long has he been gone?”

“Five years,” calmly spoke the stranger.

“And could you please allow me to ask what took him?,” asked the bishop.

“He found the magic key and just flew away on the wind,” replied the stranger.

The bishop smiled broadly as an air of genuine cheer filled his composure.

“Somehow I like that. He just found the magic key and flew away on the wind!”

“So mother has told me,” replied the stranger, who finally broke a smile.

“Just like that he flew away?,” repeated the bishop.

“Tell me something, sir. Do you know the Coach Master at Durrango?,”curtly asked the stranger.

“That I do, and he is a fine man, but a man given to the glitter of gold, I must add. He confesses often right here, in total confidence, to his many sins,” replied the bishop.

“He knew my father, if I recall rightly?,” asked the stranger.

“He knew him well, and was on extraordinarily good terms with him,” the bishop confided.

“This mission was built to baptize the natives, if I recall,” asked the stranger.

“Its history is getting long. Its been here for some three hundred years, I might add,” spoke the bishop.

“Do the native people ever return?,” asked the stranger.

“Frequently, the chiefs come here all the time; the great war chiefs of the Apache’, the Navajo, and others,” informed the bishop.

“Did these natives know my father?,” asked the stranger.

“Many did. I vividly recall your father spending time in native villages, having a great reputation among then, often seen playing ball games with their children like he was completely at home among them.”

“Do they know the Coach Master from Durrango?,” asked he stranger.

The bishop slowly turned toward a room in the rear of the mission building, nodding *yes* as he did so, and began walking. The stranger followed without question. When the two entered inside, a large highly decorated table of elegant thick glass and polished bronze sat in the center of the room. In the center of this table stood a huge chalice of gold with a stone pitcher beside it, in front of

which lay a large Spanish bible with thick wooden covers. Beside the bible sat a loaf of freshly baked oven bread. On either end of the table sat two elegant golden goblets.

The bishop began saying the Lord's Prayer, then smoothly reached into the large golden chalice in the center of the table at the same time, in a way that only the most astute would have ever noticed. He broke the bread on the table as he recited the sermon of the last supper, instructing the stranger to break the bread "in remembrance of me," he said, as he simultaneously eased a large gold and diamond studded chamber key into the stranger's vest pocket in the same smooth fashion. He then seized up the stone pitcher, filling both golden goblets, handing the other to the stranger as he picked up the one remaining. The bishop nodded as he spoke.

"Drink, allow this cup to be filled with the living spring of his life blood. Allow this day to go down with splendid achievement, and be henceforth notated in perpetuity. Let us both drink to an eternal bond of commonality in us, and to a timeless bond which stands between us."

Chapter Seven

San Andres

The stranger made his way from the back room, thanking the Bishop for his warm kindness and consideration. The Bishop nodded in gratitude as the stranger made his way from the foyer back out toward the congregation.

“As a brother in the faith unto another, may peace always walk by your side, and may blessings of gold fill your coffer.”

The stranger made his way back out into the prayer room, soon approaching Miguel, who had the look of mounting impatience on his face. The others who were kneeling beside him, glance up with a hungry glare in their eyes.

“Pay your respects, the bishop has been very kind,” informed the stranger.

“So what did you learn in all of this time?,” whispered Rolf in a slightly echoing voice.

The other kneeling patrons in the room glanced up hard in their direction. Up ahead directly center of the isle, loomed a golden cross from the wall with a crucified figure hanging. The stranger stepped outward into the isle, bowing respectfully, then touching each shoulder and his breast center, turning and heading out of the mission chapel door. Each of the other gang members did the same. Soon they gathered outside on the steps going into the foyer.

In the streets walkers passed, as did riders on horses. The small shop keepers cleaned their tables and moved their wares. Numerous people walked passed them as they stood investigating the traffic and the general scenery in the town.

“Well Sands, whats next? We ‘er here, and day is fading fast. Where are we going to take shelter around here tonight in this rather dead place?,” asked Angel in his usual voice of dark sarcasm.

“Lets have a look around,” replied the stranger.

“Somehow I have a feeling a drink is out of the question here,” spoke Santiago.

The stranger stepped over toward his horse, opened a saddlebag, then felt around on the inside. He removed the envelope the banker handed him in the

town before. On the face it had the words; De Senior Jorge, para un futuro dia comeinzo. 1880.

The stranger's trembling hands quickly opened the sealed envelope. The note was from his father, but it had gone through several hands after leaving his. Maybe one of these hands was the Marshall's, but he couldn't be sure. The date on the front side of the note was ten years earlier. His father had gone missing eleven years ago earlier. A general feeling prevailed that he still lived, but a sensation of the unknown hung around in the air every time his name was mentioned. The stranger was certain the Marshall dropped this envelope into the vault, from which the banker had removed it. He continued reading the writing, which was written in perfect English;

The Vandez was a city of its day in likeness to no other before it, or afterward. I say its true name wasn't the Vandez, but Ciuad Del Que Veno Del Cielo, an exact Spanish translation from its original native name. Find the small village called San Andrez outside of Hildego, a days ride due north.

In this village there is a small craft shop named La Veda Ez Buena. The owner is a man referred to Senior El Justo. Ask for him politely. Approach that man and tell him the code words, buscandao pasaje. He'll know about this note and my instructions. There is only one man by this name. He'll give you further details. I confirm on my most sincere honor, that this man is trustworthy. Should this man be gone when you get there, then you shall find the exact details beneath the bell in the watchtower, inside a welded iron box.

Miguel drew a heavy breath as the stranger read. He hadn't spoken much during the entire trip from El Obregon. He only possessed an appearance of deep set determination, like everything was all or nothing.

"Where from here?," he asked firmly.

"Andres," relied the stranger.

"Sands, I've been meaning to speak a word with you for some time now. Every time I begin to, for some reason the air has a way of thickening up in the area where we stand."

As the stranger continued reading the note, Miguel's eyes were fixed on the small stamp of a blindfolded woman holding a set of scales.

"I'm gonna ask you directly and to the point here," Miguel continued in a firm voice of determination. "Who else are you riding with in this venture besides us?"

"The Bishop's holy spirit, who he sent with me when we left the mission chapel," the stranger replied.

"I've warned you sternly before, Sands. Don't you dare try me," rumbled Miguel, as he stood in the face of the stranger without flinching or blinking a single time.

Angel suddenly began chuckling.

"You shut you stupid laughing!," Miguel roared.

"I'm asking you, Sands, one more time on this one," rumbled Miguel, after snapping back around.

"I've been tellin' all of ya!," Angel roared with his usual air of sarcasm.

The people in the street began swaying far around the gang as the conversation continued.

“I told you to shut up!,” thundered Miguel to Angel.

“Now, what about it, Sands?,” Miguel rumbled firmly without removing his gaze.

“I’ve got a better idea around here,” spouted Angel. “Lets kill him right now. He’s got the note. I can already tell you the note is the instructions to where it is we are headed, and what we need to know,”

“You shut your foolish ramble!,” spouted Miguel.

He said nothing as he turned to glare again at the stranger.

“Lets camp on the edge of town,” spoke the stranger. “There are no bars, no bordellos, and I don’t see a sheriff or a Marshall. Well, I take it as a good thing. That means there is no competition around here to be cuttin’ in on our plans.”

He calmly smiled back at Miguel.

“No worries, we’ll head out at first light tomorrow,” the stranger said to Miguel.

“And just where might that be to?,” Miguel continued to ask while glaring hard at the stranger.

“Andres.”

Miguel scowled hard again at the stranger.

“Sands, this just isn’t the time nor the place.”

“San Andres, its a small village just due north of here.”

The stranger calmly smiled again back toward Miguel.

A nun came down from the mission steps, heading in the direction of the gang as they all stood around on the street corner.

“You kind fellows might should be moving along,” she said. ‘We don’t want you to have any trouble now, for loitering.”

The stranger smiled at the nun, grabbing his hat and bowing his head.

“Well that’s mighty kind of ya to think of some poor lost souls like us.”

“Yes, the Lord’s work is never done, that’s for sure,” she replied.

“Well mam, this sure is a nice quiet town, no bars, no rough people,” he spoke as he smiled pleasantly in the nun’s direction.

“Sir, we take care of our own around here,” spoke the nun without glancing up into the stranger’s face. “Besides that, the Marshall comes in here on a periodic basis. He rides a circuit, to be honest with you about it. He should be here late tomorrow, or early the next morning,” the nun said.

“It sure is good, I guess, that the Marshall hasn’t forgotten about any of you like that. It does him well to swing by and check up on things a bit,” continued the stranger.

“We, around here in these parts, take care of our own. Our hanging post around back stayed busy seemed like every day, once upon a time. Strangers would come in, try to get loud, a few shots or screams were heard here and there, then the next thing anybody knew they were being carried out.”

The nun glanced away from the stranger when she spoke, seeming as if she were in search of something she had lost, or something.

“It really is strange that I don’t see a jail or a courtroom around here,” the stranger continued.

“Jails mean food that we have to provide. Its all we can do to pay the Marshall or a Sheriff. Providing him an office takes up money. A court room means a big building, and lawyers,” the nun replied with a slight shy chuckle.

“Yeah, I see,” replied the stranger, as he gazed around in his surroundings.

The people seemed to come and go as they stood around speaking.

“And judges, and all of that, takes up much needed time and money. This is valuable time people could use to really be working, doing good things for the community,” the nun spoke to the stranger as she moved around with her head down. “We don’t have time around here for idlers, thieves, drunks, whores, or whore-mongers, sir. Violent people and gun-slingers, are cast right along in there with them already mentioned, and shall surely meet the same end around here.”

“Aw, si, I guess then, that we’ll just be moving along on our way,” the stranger said to the nun.

“All of ya come on back here anytime. We’ll stand around and talk awhile.”

The nun turned, going with her head down across the road back toward the mission.

Miguel continued to glare with a hard stare toward the stranger.

“As I was sayin’ Sands.”

“Lets just kill him! Lets just shoot him down right now, and go!,” screamed Angel.

“You shut up you damn nonsense, like I told you before!,” returned Miguel.

“Well Miguel, look at it this way. If you, or Angel, or anybody else for that matter, kills me, then you’ll never find that *Coffin Of The Sun God* you are after,

and that nice enticing glitter we both know lies in there patiently a waiting," spoke the stranger.

Miguel could only turn away, breaking his hard gaze.

"and that would just be so so sad, considering how you have came from so far away, and been through so much in your search for it," the stranger continued speaking in apparent jest.

Miguel turned away again, hanging his head. The stranger patted him on his shoulder, then walked passed him as he headed on toward his own horse still tied in front of the mission.

All of the others headed toward their horses, untying them, mounting up, then following as the stranger moved out again. The town wasn't exceptionally large. Main street was gravel paved, however, but not heavily. The gravel ended at a hill on the edge of the town, and the road became narrow again. When the gang passed over the hill, they were back out into the desert. A small stream purled to the left, back toward the town. More than likely the stream and the road intersection was why the town was ever build there in the first place.

"This looks like a great place for a night camp, just off to the edge there, by the creek," said the stranger. "We'll go out over that hill there for security purposes, then make camp in the direction of the creek, but up from it a bit."

In the light of a crescent moon the gang pulled their equipment into place, took out their tents, then made camp to bed down for the night.

"Yeah, like I have always said," sighed Rolf after the tents were in place, "there's no moon during this time of the year better to sleep under than the

highwayman’s moon. Just enough light to really get a job done right, and not enough for anybody to make out a difference in the matter.”

When the gang’s eyes opened, the sun was near the horizon in the distance. The stranger arose, as always, when he made it onto the outside of the tent, Miguel was already astir, getting equipment together, putting odds and ends into his saddle bag, getting the coffee, beans, and jerked beef ready for the morning meal before exiting out. He has already stirred the coals and put the dutch oven into the coals. It was him and Miguel out and about now. The others had only sat up inside their tents, having yet to step outside. Miguel stirred in the coals a bit more, glowering over hard at the stranger.

“Today is the day, Sands. Understand that much, right here and now. I want to see something, not hear tale about it. Like you were talking yesterday, I didn’t cover hell’s wonderful creation here, just to keep on seeing dust, rocks, cactus, and feelin’ the God-forsaken wind on my face.”

The stranger glanced in the direction from where the edge of the sun was slowly peaking over the distant desert mountains. He then glanced in the exact opposite direction, pointing.

“We ‘er going to veer off the beaten path about a quarter mile up . We’ll be turning, riding directly into the cacti, that way. If we ride steady and hard in that direction we should arrive at a set of trails, with one running due west. This trail should carry us to the small village of San Andres.”

“Out directly into the desert sands, amigo?,” asked Miguel, as the others scrambled out of their tents.

“Yep, that’s right, amigo,” replied the stranger to the harden gasping face of Miguel. “Out directly into the hot desert sands, amigo.”

“Are you out of your confounded mind?,” Miguel demanded.

“Nope. This particular route is not as bad as it ordinarily would be. This is the usual route to the town from where it is we are.”

“But you don’t understand,” continued Miguel. “Its not all about the desert. This territory is owned by El Victorio, from the Chihenne band.”

“Not Victorio, Naiche, their descendant leader,” corrected the stranger.

“Same varmints. We ain’t one of them, and they don’t want us there,” clarified Miguel.

“I am on decent terms with these people. Its been a long time,” said the stranger.

“Well, now is the wrong time for a reunion. Sands, we have work to do here! That’s one of the big problems I have with you. You always seem to be intent on mixing pleasure with business, and stayin’ calm about the matter just ain’t in me, personally.”

“So then, Miguel, tell me, who else do ya have in mind to do this job?”

Miguel raised his tin cup, taking a heavy draw over the edge.

“I have to keep asking myself that same question, and fighting with myself, reminding that you were recommended by a person who is well versed in every score we are certain to be dealing with in this. I have been knowing Mitch Wiseman, over in Durrango, for mite near twenty years on now. Before he cuts a deal, he’s detailed and extraordinarily thorough. He always has utterly astounded me with the way in which he anticipates every specific detail before

they even occur, in perfect sequence, as they occur. I have never met anybody else who could even come close to his clear headed, calculating judgment. This is why I have always done business with him.

“You know, Sands, we done that big deal over there in Skeleton Canyon a while back. We traded more than four wagon loads of whiskey alone, and three more filled with ammunition and brand new guns. We made purchase at ten percent on what we traded all of this for, and in golden Spanish doubloons at that, Sands! And good ole Mitch arranged it all for us. Can you just begin to comprehend the magnitude in our grand accomplishments, Sands? And its all because of Mitch, the great master mind!”

The stranger smiled as Miguel continued speaking, saying;

“Yeah?”

“Can you sit down in your saddle there, and simply fathom the magnitude in the planning at this level. Every thing, I mean every fine detail, went down in perfect order, just as he described, with the outcome being perfectly deduced a forehand, Sands! Can you just get a grip on that sole fact for a single second here, and grasp the natural gift needed for such a function?”

“Maybe,” replied the stranger.

“Maybe?,” screamed Miguel, “Maybe? Let me tell you something right where we are standing now. Men like that can’t be created, they are born, I tell you, born!”

“Nature can have her way at times,” calmly spoke the stranger.

“That, and that reason alone, are among the reasons I stay in his company from time to time.”

“Yeah?,” replied the stranger.

“I trust this man with everything I have flowing inside of me. I trust him to the fullest extent. When he says you are the man with the knowledge I was seeking, and you are the one who knows where this coffin of the sun-god is I am seeking, I trust that with everything in me.”

“Yeah, I know where the thing is that you are searching for,” replied the stranger.

“Otherwise Sands, to tell you the truth I would kill you right now myself, from where it is I am standing! You know why? You really wanna know why I’d kill you outright? I’ll tell ya why!”

Miguel walks up and grabs the stranger by the front of his shirt with both hands.

“I saw the stamp! I have noticed how you are collecting all of this bounty. You’ve got your own cock a doodle doo plan, and I simply don’t trust it, man!,” he screamed directly into the face of the stranger, who winced as he backed away. Miguel released his shirt, then he backed away.

The stranger began brushing the area where Miguel had grabbed his so solidly.

“But there you go again getting all carried away, forgetting something,” the stranger calmly reminded him. “ I am the only one who knows where the thing is you are so in search of. You take me out, or if anybody else does, then you lose.” spoke the stranger to Miguel, who only gasped with widened, astonished eyes.

“And just think about that for a moment here. Dare to momentarily fathom the unfathomable concept at hand, will you..?”

There was a pause resembling a mysterious freeze in time.

“Somebody else out there somewhere, will lay hand on that wonderful tomb you are so much in search of right now,” the stranger calmly smiled as he said.

The tension seemed to fall from the air about as the stranger spoke the final word.

The others scrambled around dressing, racing up to the fire, sitting down to stir the coals and put more coffee on. The beans and jerky filled the air with sweet vapor as it cooked on the flame. Rolf quickly stirred the pot. He piled several spoons full into three tin plates, hanging them out to the others, pouring more coffee. As they moved to finish packing up, each man pulled a chunk of plug tobacco , placing it into his lower jaw as he worked. Soon the gang was mounting up and moving out again, as the sun peaked above a mountainous horizon on the desert plateau.

“Boy there’s nothin’ like the morning sun popping up, and us riding with it at our left side like this,” said Santiago as he took in a heavy breath.

“Yeah, even if it is on Hell’s hundred acre spread,” Rolf slurred as he soon spat out black juice onto the desert sands beside the narrow winding trail.

The trail wound up a hill, then over a few more. The sun had already risen completely above the mountains. Soon they came to a boulder with a stoneware pitcher sitting on top.

“Stop, right here,” spoke the stranger. “Lets veer directly to the left of this trail. That pitcher on that rock marks the point where good ole Naiche’s property line begins. He won’t mind me passing through. We’ll travel with the sun to our backs from here.”

“Naiche?,” Rolf asked with a puzzled expression on his face. “My earlier description was dead on target then, and Naiche is the demon who rules this beautiful territory.”

“They’ll remember us, Sands,” informed Miguel, “they’ll remember us well, since it was us who brought joy to them, when no others would. We kept them safe from harm, when all others had totally abandoned them for good. I have a bargaining point here, with them, Sands. I could do my own negotiating, on my own terms, Sands?”

The stranger chuckled underneath his breath.

“Really Miguel?”

To the side the rising sun lit up the mountainous walls, which seemed closer in now, for some strange reason. Any and all objects on the bare stone was now alight in a perfect silhouette against a clear blue sky. Angel drew a folding spy glass from his vest pocket as he rode along. He unfolded it, using it to scan the mountain tops. On the mountain chain to his left behind him, beside virtually every boulder of any size to make it stand out, stood a mount with a warrior leader positioned on it. Up ahead to the right in the distance, the same held true. These warriors were somehow invisible to the unaided and untrained eye, however.

“There can be no doubt that we are smack dab in the middle of somebody’s back yard here. I can’t tell what they think of us, at the present time.”

The stranger took out the cat skin and its drying head. He waved it four times, then stopped, waved it four more, then paused, then repeated the same motion.

“What in hell’s name are you doing, Sands?,” asked Angel.

“That’s my personal peace sign, between me and Naiche. He knows me, and I know him, but it’s been awhile, for sure.”

Soon glints were seen from the mountains in the back drop to those ahead to the left, and eventually far ahead near the very antelope trail the gang was now riding down.

“What do you think that was about, Sands?,” asked Santiago.

“They ‘er just telling one another they have company, that’s all, and they ‘er telling one another a bit about us, and me, since the word has spread around some. It’ll be alright, but we had better pick up pace some. I, personally, don’t want to get into San Andres behind the light of day. Its much easier to work in a frontier village when there is light to see by, I feel,” the stranger replied to the young, Santiago.

The sun shown with a light that felt as if it were falling from the sky as some type of solid, hammering the men mercilessly as it did so. A powerful thirst was coming on. Water could quench the first thirst, but the recurring second thirst seemed to compel even more than the thirst, and the only thing that would quench it was agave beer, or any beer right about now to be honest, whiskey, or tequila. Miguel would over look any gratification of this, until the work was done.

There also existed a hunger for female flesh, and matters of the flesh in general, but this used up more time than taking drink, and both time and money right now was in short supply, according to Miguel. The area was basically unknown territory to everybody, except the stranger. This part of nobody else knowing what was really going on, Miguel and the crew now suddenly being

thrust into foreign, potentially hostile territory even, and the fact of him having no alternative choice but to fully trust this quiet, but calculating stranger more and more; gave him a knotting feeling in the pit of his stomach. This feeling emanating throughout his body was not one to his liking.

To make matters worse, he also felt that he was losing his directions back, should he ever have an occasion nor a need to know. In his heart, since he had done so much traveling and living out in the open, for so many live long years now, he somehow knew the mountains behind them, and to the right, would carry him all the way northbound into New Mexico territory. From there he could make his way by following the stars and the lights above the mountains on the distant horizon, to Virginia City, and Reno.

He knew that he was far down into Mexico right now. The Mexican's overlooked a lot, he was well aware of. He was Mexican himself, but his family originated from up in what was now New Mexico territory. The stranger had a Spanish name, speaking fluent Spanish, yet something about him was different. Maybe it was because he looked Gringo that Miguel didn't trust him. He often fought hard with himself to push any preconceived notions of mistrust out of his head, yet the actions of Sands, and stranger, seemed to support all of his inner warning to forbear on all trust. Not trusting no man a hundred percent was what managed to keep him alive for so many long years now.

But this time out was different from all others in the past. For some reason he feared the emanating conclusion to this great quest. He yearned for it, tinging with excitement, yet feared it all the same. He glanced over at Sands as he rode along, searching for any type of premonition indication.

Miguel chewed as he contemplated, glaring at the stranger as he savored every slow chomp. All that he could see was this somewhat thin, tall, quiet, but very confident and calculating figure, riding high along beside his gang. The air was almost as if he, himself, the stranger, felt he owned this gang. He didn't want to inform the others, but he somehow knew that upon them arriving in this village, there would be no turning back. He and all the others would have to place full faith directly in this stranger, this bizarre stranger, who he somehow felt he could not trust, and that his very life was at stake by even being in the same company with this man He spat the black juice again as he continued fighting his time tested intuition.

"We 'er getting close," intimated Miguel, following only his instincts and gut feeling, while still trying to maintain his own control over the situation materializing around him.

"Yep, we 'er gettin' close," the stranger replied.

"How close?," he thundered out of his own frustration.

"See the sand dune up ahead?," asked the stranger.

Miguel looked, the sand dune was scattered with nine feet tall cacti, and covered by prickly pear. Heat waves danced above the summit, as the desert wind moaned in the distance. Otherwise there was nothing, not even much of a trail to lead the way anymore.

"Yeah but-," Miguel attempted to articulate.

"See how those heat waves rise, but dance to the left slightly?," asked the stranger to Miguel.

"Yeah, but-"

“Well our village sits just over that hill. Those heat waves are deflected by movement in the distance, which generates its own wind, cooling a specific environment. We ‘ll make it out to that dune,” the stranger said to Miguel. “You see, in open space like this desert vastness, distance is all relevant, thus many imposing situations in the backdrop can affect our perceptions and understanding.”

As the gang moved toward the dune, the makings of a path gradually came into view in the sand. Besides this, there was nothing else to be seen of consequence. All the men now glared hard at the stranger, yet none volunteered to make any comment.

“Mother is far away behind us,” said Santiago to shatter the silence, “and somehow I regret that I have neglected to pay her a visit.”

The others said nothing as the horses clomped along on the materializing trail, to the top of the hill summit. A human skeleton lay half buried in the sand. An arrow shaft stuck directly upward from his midpoint. A distant moan of the desert wind created a heavy sense of looming dread, although none among them wanted to admit to it.

“My God, what part of hell is this man taking us to?,” asked Rolf to the others underneath his breath as they paused.

In the distance there stood what appeared to be a native village. The village was made of mud bricks in the old Navajo style. It appeared as large as Hildego, but with much more activity going on. There was no outward Spanish tradition here, observable as of yet. The scene was strikingly Navajo, but the atmosphere

emanating was one of inexplicable apprehension. The primary concentration of Navajo lay much farther northward, however

“These people were once part of the Hopi nation, according to a timeless Apache legend, but they relocated, being ones among the long awaited *Star People*. They have their own name. They have their own place, time, and their still undiluted patrimonial tradition.” calmly informed the stranger as the gang slowly moved forward on their horses. “They speak to their own from upon the wind. They peer into the future. They move forward from the present, backward far into the past, often returning forward far into the future. It is said they can peer directly into the very hearts and minds of people. They are known to the Apache’ as *Pam Warz Alangw*. *Los Sabios* in Spanish. This basic mud brick village, simple as it may appear to all of you, is known in Spanish as *Ciudadela Del Cielo*, in direct translation of their own heritage language.”

Miguel glared even harder now at the stranger without saying a single word, as the entire gang paused again, while still yet upon the huge sand dune, gazing down upon the mud brick village built into a lonely sandstone outcrop in the desert vastness.

“You look at me, and you look directly into my face when I speak to you, Sands. I only care about what I came here for. I am after only one thing, and one thing only. I am only going to speak and say what I must, one more damn time! You take me there, Sands, you find me what I paid Mitch good money to have you bring me to; or only four of us will make it out of here, if not only the best one or two of four. Do you get what I am telling you here? If nothing else good ole Mitch will have a long talk with you when this venture is over, Sands.”

The stranger took a deep breath, slowly chewing, then leaned to spit onto the eerie red and yellow sand. He picked his head back up, easing backward in his saddle as they began slowly riding along.

"Yeah.., but only one.., the best one.., or two, is gonna make it back, Miguel. So I take it that means three.., or maybe four.., are gonna remain."

Miguel glared harder at the stranger while his breathing suddenly increased, then spoke up.

"When this is all over, I am seeing, right then and there, that you and me settle our personal differences, between ourselves," fired Miguel.

"Yeah? But what did you say now? Only the best one.., or two, is gonna make it back," calmly replied the stranger. "Am I right about that, now?"

"That's up to you, personally, Sands," fired Miguel in return, as he neared losing his control.

"So please tell me, just who is it that is going to enjoy all of that glitter we are going to find in the Vandez?," the stranger asked Miguel. "Its such a pathetic shame all of it might just have to sit around there, going to waste like this, until it is discovered once more again by some future generation."

Miguel continued to scowl hard, with more contemplation being put into it, as the gang continued on down the large sand dune toward the village.

Chapter Eight

The City That Masquerades As A Small Town

The gang made their way slowly toward the small adobe village tucked away inside the isolated limestone hillside. As they neared the village it actually appeared much larger than it did from a distance. Inside the hill were thousands of cleverly designed apartment complexes, complete with garden terraces. Inside the garden were grown drought tolerant date palms, to the absolute astonishment of the entire gang. A marble substructure shield prevented the roots from penetrating the adobe structure itself. The adobe structure appeared to have been built directly onto this attractive substructure.

Then there were also the typical native vegetables grown, being squash, beans, onions, corn, and peppers of many varieties. The corn was stored hard on the cob, but it was soaked in water dripped through wood ash until the outer shell popped. It was removed from the water and dried, then ground into a grainy meal used to thicken soup or plain water when heated over a fire as it was added. In this manner the niacin content of the corn was effectively neutralized, then plain dried bones could be boiled, and virtually nothing could literally transform into a filling wholesome meal.

As the gang neared the complex they soon realized it was in possession of an effective defensive mechanism, consisting of lookouts, message carrying runners

with trade off stations every twenty miles, and flaming arrows shot at night according to an established code signal. For all practical purposes, it would have been virtually impossible for any armed party to launch a surprise attack. The only method of conquest would be to overwhelm the city, but had such a possibility been presumed, and could the residents covertly escape? Was there a subterranean tunnel complex? The dazzling quality of the ingenuity already perceived and beheld would indicate an answer to the proposed intellectual question as being an unhesitating *yes*.

When the gang entered into this unique mountainside adobe complex there were shops of every sort selling vegetables, meat, clothing in a style resembling the Navajo or Hopi, peyote button, hashed up loco weed, shrunken human heads, animal hides, and many other products. There were also small compact complexes with well dressed, painted girls and older women, speaking colorfully in provocative tones using their native tongue, obviously desiring an inquisitive approach. There was no time for play at present moment, so the gang kept moving along.

“Its been a while,” said the thinning Rolf laconically, who had gone days without a bath, was covered in windblown sand, with his now shoulder length unkempt greasy hair dangling in a rather disgusting display as he bounced along on his trotting horse.

“Time they smell you they are certain to either raise their price dramatically, or run away like mad, depending on how desperate these soiled ladies are for gold coin,” sneered Angel.

“The thin looking one there, wearing the flower garland and the Navajo dress, has a certain twinkle in her eye when she looks this way, if you ask me,” slurred Rolf, with a certain anxiety in his voice as he nodded his head and winked at the girl in passing. The girl only smiled pleasantly, hanging her head, seeming to avoid making direct eye to eye contact.

“You know, we’ve lived carelessly among native women for so long,” Miguel spoke up, “for some reason I can’t quite yet seem to fathom, I have a bad feeling since we entered into this village.

“Oh yeah?,” fired Rolf in sarcasm, “How now old cow? Its been a while, and I’m ready for a little R and R myself, as we used to say back during my army days.”

“Ole Miguel may be somewhere close to right, there” spoke up the quiet stranger. “These enterprising vixens knew we were coming around long before we even made it over the hill. We’ve been sized up according to our perceived threat potential. There is more than one way to launch a direct attack.”

“What in hell are you talking about now?,” thundered Angel with a sneer.

“Haven’t you noticed yet? This place is already far more than it led us to believe from a distance,”reminded the stranger.

“Come on now, Sands,” Angel continued to sneer. “Are you trying to scare us up a bit there?”

“This small quaint village, as we thought it was from the hill back there, is not really so small,” the stranger continued. “ These people are not the types of native we are used to. The Apache, Hopi, and Navajo are somewhat shorter in statue, and darker in complexion. These people have more of a bronze hue,

sometimes nearing that of a moon color. The language? Why I haven't figured out where to place yet. It isn't Apache, Navajo, Hopi, or any other tribe from the area that I am familiar with."

"Yeah?, that little delicate vixen back there, all painted up lookin' for a chance to trade for some gold, I swear had the cutest little set of piercing blue eyes, if you ask me," sneered Rolf, who licked his lips. "I don't know about any of you, but I'm in sore need of a trick and a sweet treat, myself."

"Business first," reminded Miguel, "we accomplish what we came here for, then we can play. I will not lose sight of my goal, under no circumstances, regardless of who else may try to dissuade me. We are so damn close right now. Do all of you low life cod heads realize that? We are so close, and we'll have it made once we reach our marvelous Mecca in the beyond, boys!"

"But I have this pervasive question I have been dying to ask for so long, Miguel. I mean," he began to chuckle in a type of repressed antagonism," I've been seeing you become so aroused around us about this place, for so damn long now. What's in this venture for us? You never effectively answered that sole question for me, or anybody else," Angel fired.

"If there is anything to be had, you'll all get your share," slurred Miguel, as he cut his eyes back toward the stranger, who said nothing while simply riding along.

"Yeah? Well I have been riding with you for five years, now Miguel," Angel continued to sneer. " I have been largely contented, but I know you, Miguel. I see how anxious you are. I see how crazy you get when things don't go your way, as

you anticipated. When this stranger, Sands, first rode up, I vividly recall how you stayed up, looking. I recall how excited you were when he finally rode up-”

“Enough!,” thundered Miguel, “enough of your confounding whining! If you don’t like something, well there is the road. Go back to where it is you came, then.”

“No Miguel, not this time,” Angel continued to scowl, “Me doing that right now, would make everything far too handy for you around here, now that we are nearing our destination.”

Angel glared steadily at Miguel as they rode along down through the streets of the adobe complex.

“Just pause and think about it for a moment. Here all of us are, at long last. You, right on the edge of what you believe must surely be that massive haul you have been silently burning with lust so long for-”

Miguel turned toward Angel with a hardened perturbed look on his face, and his right hand moved slowly on his pistol.

“I told you to shut up, didn’t I, Angel?”

Angel placed his right hand on his own pistol.

“That’s right cod, go for it! I’ve felt it comin’ for a long time now. I didn’t want to say anything until the right time. I had anticipated that the big haul would be the right time, Miguel.” Angel gazed around at the others all wide eyed with antagonizing excitement. “This time must be it! Do all of you around here get where I am coming from?”

“ *La Veda Ez Buena,”* the stranger suddenly spoke.

Angle and Miguel continued to glare into the other's eyes, with their right hands remaining firmly positioned on their pistols.

"Keep your eyes on these store fronts here. The name is supposed to be written in Spanish, rather than in these hieroglyphic symbols from this unknown strange language," the stranger continued.

Sometimes the signs were tacked or pegged into the wooden pole at the door structure of the store itself, or hanged from string in the center of the store opening, swinging back and forth in the blustery desert wind. This custom was uncharacteristic in native village complexes of the day, but this village was uncharacteristic, in and of itself.

"And just think," slurred Rolf, through a dust choked throat as he gazed around at the others, "all I wanted right now was get a little shine on my skin flute here."

"You shut your disgusting confounded mouth, you filthy pig!," roared Miguel, with his hand remaining on his right side pistol "or I'll kill both of you right about now."

"Yeah? I had you pegged all along. That's what you are lookin' for, isn't it? A handy excuse, right?," fired angel again.

"Now, now, boys," interrupted the stranger "keep you eyes on our prize lying somewhere in the beautiful desert mirage here before us. We need to find our sign."

"No! I got you pegged Miguel," Angel thundered. "Just like that boy you murdered in cold blood over at the bunk house before we left. He didn't die

playing with his gun. You haven't fooled any damn body around here, Miguel, but yourself. You've been planning for this all along-"

"Shut up! Shut your pathetic mouth! None of us want to hear your opinions." roared Miguel. " If you don't like it, then you know where the road is that you came in on. Either you are with us in our venture, or your not. It's all just that damn simple, Angel."

"When I get my share in this, and I know there must be a good one, you can count me out from here on. I am through with you! You hear me?," Angel roared.

"And there it is," the stranger said suddenly as the horses paused.

A complete silence fell upon the gang. All anger quelled into a firm silence. Miguel trembled in cheer at the sight, as he read the words aloud.

" *La Veda Ez Buena,* the most beautiful words I've read or heard spoke since this venture began."

Tears rolled down Miguel's face as the horses neared the store front. The gang paused, every rider dismounted, carefully tying the reins onto a convenient pole tied across two posts, another anomaly uncharacteristic of native villages at large.

Upon entering, the store seemed more as a lowly lit den filled with a variety of products directed toward Spanish travelers, interestingly enough. A variety of vegetables sat on several tables, but there were leather ponchos, cloaks, boots of lizard, crocodile, and cow leather ; and tequila, blue agave, complete with the agave worm, or a pickled scorpion, or a peyote button, all neatly contained in clear glass bottles, corked up elegantly and ready to be served up. A well

dressed native lady walked up, greeting the travelers in perfect Spanish as she smiled warmly;

“May I help you men?”

The stranger spoke up in his calm, collective voice of one in absolute control, in perfect Spanish;

“We came here seeking *Senior El Justo.”*

The lady suddenly was overtaken by a nervous glint in her eye.

“He’ll be here in one moment. Help yourselves around the store.”

The lady turned and walked toward the rear of the shop.

“You men hear that?,” slurred Rolf, “the kind lady told us to help ourselves. I think a bottle of this tequila looks mighty damned appealing to me right about now.”

Rolf snatched a bottle up from the table. An old man in a cloak and hood sudden appeared from the rear of the store, shuffling toward he gang, while the unkempt Rolf uncorked the bottle and began drinking the dark liquid inside.

“May I help you gentlemen?,” asked the elder in perfect Spanish.

“Sir, I only have one thing to say, I believe you might be so kind as to lend me an ear,” spoke the stranger. “ *buscandao pasaje,”* he said in a low muffled breath.

The old man gazed upward from the hood over his head intensively, directly into the handsome face of the stranger..

“So you are him, the magnificent one I was told would one day arrive on our premises, Ringo Arenas.”

Angel gazed with widened eyes focused directly upon the stranger, as his breath began to heave.

“Well I’ll be Goddamned! I knew it. I knew it all along!,” he abruptly exclaimed.

“I knew your father well,” the old man continued on while ignoring the interrupting exclamation of Angel. “I greatly respected him. He was a man of great honor and valor. He intuitively left me the clear instructions. Go out of town on the southern side. Exit outward for a thousand yards. You’ll arrive at a certain mount with the sign of an ass. Here lay the ruins of the grand old city. You have your instructions.”

The old man handed the stranger an envelope.

“Ringo Arenas.., I thought this moment for me would never arrive. You are the long prophesied savior of our people. The magnificent one, son of our patronizing saint, *El Que Nos Dio Gloria!*” the old man gasped from underneath his Navajo styled hooded cloak, as he gazed fixedly upon the stranger. “He gave us wealth when we were starving and destitute. He gave us elegance when there was only squalor. He gave us education when only ignorance prevailed. He gave us hope, when all else was lost. I know his dark reputation in the world of men, but in our world he was the god of all light. You are his son, so therefore you are one of ours. Welcome!”

Angel gazed with steely eyes forward upon this calm composure of the stranger, gasping in great astonishment, as his breathing commenced to pick up in pace.

“I’ll be Goddamned!,” he would say repeatedly as he struggled to draw breath in the force of his astonishment. “I knew it. I knew it all along!,” he gasped as he struggled to breath.

Chapter Nine

Sign Of The Ass

The blazing desert sun crested and was beginning its descent at somewhere between two and three O’ clock high. The hoses upon which the gang were saddled slowly made their way outward from the limestone mount into which this unusual adobe town was constructed. A southbound direction would naturally be toward the left, facing it. Angel again began to glare upon the form of the stranger as he rode tall in the saddle among them.

“Well I’ll be Goddamned!,” he said, pausing as he continued to glare. “If it ain’t Ringo Arenas himself. Your father, the one those people call El Que Nos Dio Gloria, was in reality the infamous *Benjamin Nash*, who rode so gallantly with

Quantrill’s guerrilla bushwhackers. In fact, he was the most hunted of the hunted, back during his day.”

The stranger continued sitting tall in the saddle, never acknowledging or disputing any words thrown upon him by Angel. A long paused ensued. Angel continued to glare, with his mouth gaped open in shear astonishment at the revelation.

“He and his accomplices rode with the bunch who sacked Lawrence,” Angel slurred in his enduring astonishment. “Over two hundred people were murdered there in cold blood.”

Miguel continued to scowl without shifting his steely gaze. There was an enduring pause.

“And these people call him a saint? Imagine that, for only a moment, now! A good for nothing thief and cold blooded murder being called a saint, for crying out loud around here!”

Angel paused in his verbal assault, but held his fixated gaze upon the stranger, who continued to ride along without acknowledging Angel or his verbal assault, nor speaking out to dispute his words.

“I have a personal beef with Nash,” Angel continued on. “Nash murdered my grandfather in an attack on Pleasant-ville.”

There was another pause as he continued to glare intensively at the stranger.

“They burned that quiet town to the ground, murdering everybody inside those town limits, including women and children..”

“Bad things often happen during war time, Angel. We just have to move on and get over it,” the stranger spoke to Angel without glancing over in his direction.

There was another long pause, where Angel glowered with his mouth opened in astonishment.

“But there is only one problem.., the war by then was over for a year.”

Another enduring pause.

“Like I said earlier, Angel, bad things often happen during war time,” spoke the stranger as he rode along without acknowledging his verbal salient.

“This event was a heist, starting with the bank. The bank was wiped clean of all its holdings, and the workers all gunned down in cold blood. Then the Federal Building was held up, gutted, ransacked and burned. All those young women brutally raped, and finally murdered.”

“Yeah, war does seem to bring out the worst in all of us, Angel,” replied the stranger.

“The churches robbed, the businesses, all those good people murdered like lame dogs in a back alley somewhere.”

There was another long pause.

“There were four more such towns, robbed, all the inhabitants murdered like dogs where they stood, then callously burned to the ground..”

“Yeah?,” replied the stranger without yet glancing over to acknowledge Angel.

“Now we know where he got the money to bless those people with. We know why he did this, which was to create a loyal alliance, who would gladly shield him

any time he need it. So where is it that you, this demon's son, are leading us? I know it isn't into his stash! So what's out there? What's out there that you and Miguel there know about, that the rest of us don't? Answer me that!"

There was a long pause as the gang now stood on the edge of the town. From where the sun stood, they turned left with it to their back. Now they were going southbound. Their place of destination only lay a mere thousand yards out from this point.

"Then there was you," continued Angel, as he glowed in a voice trembling with mounting anger. "I knew I recognized you from somewhere. I was in Tylersville during the great hold up. I'll never forget the name of the commander in charge of the gang who did that job. I recognized your face from the first moment I ever laid eyes on you!"

Nothing was said as the gang continued to ride along through the desert sands.

"You were the infamous Captain Sands, Anglo-chieftain of the Apache scouts. You were said to be better at scouting than they were. But you also had another self serving side, didn't you?"

The stranger never replied, he only kept riding directly ahead into the desert vastness.

"You are in this venture for yourself! Like all the other times. You are in it for what *you* can get! What kind of deal do you have going on in Durrango with that Coach Master I hear so much about from Miguel? Mitch, I think his name is. Wiseman, if I may continue to recall here. What have you and him got going on here with us? Are you in with the law? Have you cut a deal with the law? Hugh,

Sands? Is that what it is, Sands; or Ringo Arenas, I think it is they call you? Well I call you a no good, thievin', ' filthy, double crossing son of a bitch. That's what I call you, right to your face!"

"Shut up!," suddenly roared Miguel, "I'm sick of your pathetic useless talk. So what if he is? He is in this thing with us now, isn't he? We can't go anywhere, but neither can he. He, just like us, are in this thing all the way up our balls, and the bitter end, what e'er it may most certainly be. So just shut up your pathetic complaining around here, Angel!"

Angel began to laugh hysterically, almost to the point of falling from his horse.

"Seven hundred," the stranger spoke suddenly underneath his breath. "Eight hundred."

"What are you mumbling now?," asked Miguel.

"He's counting his profit on mine and your head!," thundered Angel

"Nine hundred," continued the stranger.

They arrived at an area of nine large mounds, appearing more like small mountains with somewhat flat tops. The gang continued moving in the midst of these mounds.

"A thousand," the stranger said.

"Tell us now what this counting is all about. Are you expecting a thousand dollars for us? Is that all we are worth to you, or somebody?," Angel continued to rage at the astonishment of the others, who made no comment.

“No, I’m counting the yards out. This point we have paused at, marks the thousand yard point. Only one of these mounds here marks our highly sought after destination.”

Angel suddenly thundered ahead first, running his horse to the summit of the closest mound. He gazed around hysterically, racing back down, screaming as he did, “I’ll get my share! No pig of a man is going to keep me from it! Well nothing is up there!,” he raged out of frustration. “But if there is anything to be had, I am making damn sure I’ll get my share in this!”

Angel turns his horse until it rears, racing up to the summit of the next mound. He takes time gazing at around the summit of the next hill.

“You see anything?,” thunders Miguel at the top of his lungs.

Angel’s horse gallops down the hill at full speed, then back up the next one at full gallop. He takes his time glancing around on the summit.

“See anything?,” asked the stranger.

“Only a stone with some strange carvings, but I can’t tell what any of them are,” Angel replies in frustration.

The others ride up the mound at a steady even speed. Upon making it to the summit, the stranger reaches into his saddlebag, retrieving a large piece of white chalk. He tosses it to Angel, who catches it, gazing down upon it with a puzzled look on his face.

“Here, rub the carving with that, and see if we can make it out,” instructed the stranger.

Angel stooped down and began scrubbing the stone with all of his strength. After thirty minutes a picture gradually emerged.

“What in hell’s name is is this thing?,” he began to rage as he placed his hand on the stone, pausing to rest. “It looks like a worthless burro to me!”

“This is it, then!,” replied the stranger. “We were instructed by the old man in the hood, to find the mound with the sign of an ass.”

“Now what are we to do?,” asked Miguel.

The stranger reached back into his saddle bag, retrieving a sealed envelope given unto him by the old man in the hood.

“The instructions read like this.” the stranger continued. “We are to find he place of the pie sign. This sign being two long rocks standing up on edge, with one flat one covering both edges. This sign shall mark our place of entrance.”

“What?,” spouted Miguel, “there must be a thousand such signs around here on this plateau.”

“This is a huge area, Sands, or is it Ringo? Where is our entrance point?”

The stranger began scratching his chin as he gazed around.

“Well I guess such is the great question at hand. What area around here would possibly bear an entrance point into a catacomb complex?”

The gang gazed around on what must have been a flat topped hundred acre area. The ruin walls were evident everywhere the eyes could see. The landscaped dipped and rose. Most of the areas were only dirt or sand covered with a yellow grass growing on sandy plateau areas. One area to the far left, appeared to have developed from the very stone itself. In the distant backdrop the mountains strangely formed the sign of pie.

“There it is,” whispered Miguel with a sudden crazed zest in his voice.

The gang raced across the sand and grass plateau toward the stone walls. When they arrived, the gang paused.

“Yeah, and that looks like our catacomb entrance,” spoke the stranger as they examined a cave like appearance descending down into the stone wall.

“My God, this is it!,” exclaimed Miguel, as he glance at the mountains in the backdrop, then back down into the cave. “But its blocked with this great big flat appearing boulder stone. All of us together will not be able to move this thing, Sands; or is Ringo?”

“Yeah, so whut in hell’s name ‘er we gonna do?,” asked Rolf

Santiago glanced around at the other, then seemed to force himself to make a reply.

“Are we gonna blast it out, Ringo? I’ve always wanted to do such a thing.”

The stranger signed.

“Yeah boy, we ‘er gonna blast this damn thing out, here looks like.”

Rolf and Santiago eagerly raced back down the mound to fetch the dynamite. It would be a few minutes before they returned. Angel now glared at Miguel and the stranger.

“Ringo Arenas! They call you Ringo Arenas.”

Angel burst into laughter as he spoke the words.

“With the murdering thieving father, who killed women, children, preachers and deacons. Robbed from banks and burned whole towns down, yet was still called a saint. Just fathom that picture for a moment here!”

Angel nearly fell over himself with laughter.

“Imagine that!”

Angel continued laughing until he gradually calmed. The stranger and Miguel only stood silent, awaiting his next words. He suddenly calmed into an inflexible seriousness.

“Before the boys get back with the firecrackers, me and the both of you need to work out a few details in this equation.”

There was another pause. Nobody else said anything.

“I demand to know what my part in this haul is?

“You’ll get what the others get, if there is anything to be had at all here. You’ll get ten percent.”

Angel paused, then gazed forward steadily upon both Miguel and the stranger.

“I’ve just been around to long not to know better. Is ten percent all I get, after everything I’ve done around here in service to this enterprise?” He slowly turned to face Miguel. “ Is a measly, rotten, ten percent, really all the thanks I am going to get in this hell, blood, and grit filled venture, Pops?”

“Whose to say where anybody will get anything, after all is said and done here?,” informed Miguel with seriousness in his voice. “ We ‘er all taking huge chances around here, Angel. Its called life, and nothing is guaranteed in this life.”

Angel gazed hard at the two with a slightly astonished sneer on his face, then a menacing full smile slowly irked it’s way across his sun dried visage.

Chapter Ten

A *Great Clamor High In The Sky*

Before anymore words could be spoken, the other three came running back up the hill with seven sticks of dynamite in their hands.

“Son, I can’t wait! Blasting this big rock out and opening up this cave, is going to be so much fun!,” announced Santiago with an appearance of youthful cheer on his smooth hairless face.

“You just hold your horses, boy,” glared Rolf. “We haven’t figured out what exactly lies on the other side of that stone block yet.”

“I have a good idea,” snarled Angel, as he glared hard at the stranger and Miguel, “and I fully aim to get my fair share in this stake.”

“That’s not exactly fair, Angel now. We knew we were looking, and knew there was certain to be a take somewhere, since there always has been. In this particular instance, however, we know few specifics,” informed Miguel, “So you can quit makin’ crass accusations!”

Angel turned to glare hard again at both the stranger and Miguel, speaking without facing Rolf or the youthful, Santiago.

“You know, life doesn’t always hand everything out to you, right cut and dried like that. We men have to learn to put things together for ourselves. This is true especially in matters of war, the heart, and gold!,” replied Angel, who paused a second, then continued to snarl. “To be honest and direct, I just don’t like the looks of what I am seeing here. I smell some big cheese in a plugged up catacomb here, boys, and see two great big rats I know just as certain as hell is hot, will turn into the biggest boar hogs this side of sweet Mary’s Christendom.”

Angel continued smiling intimidatingly as he glared hard at both Miguel and the stranger.

“I feel eyes upon us. Eyes that we can’t see. So give me that dynamite, boys,” spoke the stranger.

“Here ‘s three sticks,” said Santiago as he handed the dynamite over to the stranger.

Rolf grabbed the six foot brace drill they had laid down when they walked up.

“I figured you might need this,” slurred Rolf.

The stranger drilled a hole four feet deep underneath the stone, angling backwards another two feet. He was almost flush with the sand as he knelt to force the final touches on with rather hurried movements. He drilled another

hole of the same on the other side of the huge unnaturally square boulder. After he forced the final touches on, then withdrew the drill, he glanced up toward Angel.

“Fetch me a chisel and a hammer. I know we got one somewhere.”

“I’ll be darned, Sands, somehow we thought of everything,” said Rolf as he handed Angel the chisel and two pound hand drill hammer. As the stranger took it from Angel’s hands, Angel commenced glaring hard upon him.

“You know I am standing up here looking outward onto this desert. Its all so vast, so majestic with the white sandstone mountains eerily in the distance, the cacti, a coyote or a jackrabbit running here or there, and the windswept dunes.., for just as far as the bloody eye can see. The distant moan of the wind sort of, like, sends a chill up my spine, with its own particular brand of excitement to go with it. Wouldn’t you agree?

“Maybe,” replied the stranger to Angel.

“If I look hard enough out there, I might see a roadrunner flick past, or maybe an antelope, sometimes a buffalo-”

“Oh yeah, Ange’ there? Buffalo are really rare this day and time. You sure you are seeing buffalo? Well hand me that last stick of dynamite, if you could be so kind,” spoke the stranger as he turned to make the final blows on the chisel.

Now the stranger had a nice wallowed out hole at the top of the stone, where it fit into the mouth of what appeared as being a natural cave in a mountain rim on the edge of this high plateau.

Angel grabbed the dynamite from the hand of Santiago, turning amd handing it over to the stranger.

“Some extra cannon fuse would be good right about now,” spoke the stranger out loud.

Rolf handed him a roll.

“Damn I must admit it, you boys sure are good.”

Angel only stood by glaring hard as the stranger worked, splicing the extra length of fuse onto that already on the stick of dynamite.

“I have a problem, Sands, or Ringo, it is that they call you..”

The stranger kept on twisting the fuses. He began dropping the sticks into the three holes without glancing back at Angel.

“All I see out there is empty desert. Hell, I don’t even see any sign of buffalo, antelope, deer, horse, or that village we just left, San Andres, was it? That big dune out there that we rode over, is blocking our view to our left from here.”

“Sometimes we are called upon to open our eyes. Life doesn’t hand us everything straight up, Angel. The coyotes you saw ran outward on two opposite sides out there in the middle of the desert. A small dust cloud looms in the distance above the dune to our left. Sometimes we have to connect the dots for ourselves, Angel,” the stranger said as he picked up the lengthened ends of the fuses.

“A match, please,” the stranger said as he held out his hand.

Angel passed him one he took from Rolf, who got it from Santiago.

“Gather these tools up, boys, and take them down over the edge of the hill there, from where you entered in,” the stranger roared. “Bring the rest of that dynamite with you when you come back up.”

Angel and the others did as they were commanded. The stranger struck the match on the thigh of his leg. He touched the flame to the fuse. When the three fuses commenced to hiss as the flame slowly moved upward, he walked on toward the edge where the others squatted to remain far out of harms way.

“Thousand and one, thousand and two, thousand and three, thousand and four, thousand and five, thousand and six-,” the stranger counted as he lay.

The dynamite suddenly exploded, throwing large chunks of stone high into the air, and far over the edge of the mountain side. The tied horses reared below from being startled by the massive sound, and the stir of stone from above. When the terrible noise ended and the dust and rubble settled, the five men arose from their safety cover. Cautiously they walked toward the blasted stone, where an opening in it was large enough for them to walk through. The blast had virtually cut a ragged doorway right through the stone.

The stranger glanced backward and upward, and out toward the vast desert beyond. The dust cloud thickened above the dune. Yet he saw nothing out on the desert floor.

“So what are we waiting for here?,” announced Angel. “The dirty work has all been done. Now the prize is sitting there, just beggin’ for us to race inside and get it.

Angel glared hard as he spoke the words to the stranger, who stepped on inside through the doorway. He made his way inside for ten feet or so, with his back toward Angel. The others stood outside thirty feet or so away from the doorway, waiting for an answer from Angel and the stranger. Suddenly the

stranger heard a snap. He jerked around to see Angel with his pistol drawn, and the hammer fully cocked.

“I’ve been waiting for this magic moment, Sands, Ringo, or whatever the hell is is that they call you. I’ve worked hard enough, and been slighted far too many times. Now its my turn to shove that great big rock hard shaft into a little tiny hole, and reap all the divine rewards for doing so.”

The stranger suddenly ducked as Angel pulled the trigger, the bullet narrowly missing its mark. He quickly drew his own, firing as Angel’s thin lanky figure raced out the doorway, and around the corner. Many more gun shots were heard on the outside. A clatter of horses was all around. The stranger paused up against the cavern wall, hoping to catch a glimpse of the situation materializing on the outside.

From the opening he could see Miguel and the other’s taking cover with their backs turned toward him. Angel raced up, taking careful aim at Miguel with his back turned. He fired, and the form of Miguel reared suddenly, collapsing backward onto the ground.

More gunshots rang out from beyond. The stranger rushed out from the cave, over to the figure of Miguel, who lay wincing in pain on the ground. He was still breathing with his eyes opened.

“The tops gangs are here, right now, Sands,” he gasped. “The Comancheros, the English Range Riders, The Prairie Falcons, The Bloody Texicanos, they are all here,” he struggled to say, “in this one place.”

“Whose the chief gang?,’ asked the stranger.

“The Falcons, they are top. The others are contenders, but contenders who refuse to pay tribute,” Miguel struggled to say in heaving gasps.

“I just don’t get it!,” the stranger said. “Was it this supposed coffin attracting them here as well?,” asked the stranger as he scratched his head.

“This is all my fault. I should have known better,” Miguel continued to gasp as his body heaved. “Mitch Wiseman has always been in everything for himself. We were all contracted in to do the dirty work,” Miguel gasped. “I should have known better, Sands. Don’t let them do it. Don’t let Mitch accomplish his personal objective, at our disposal.”

“What objective? What allure does this supposed coffin hold? Its only a myth, for crying out loud here. I saw it, however, when I was a kid. The cave wasn’t blocked back then. There was gold plate on the sarcophagus and a bit on the walls, but not nearly enough to justify all of this trouble. Besides that, Miguel, I was on my own mission, just between the two of us.”

The stranger gazed outward at the shooting the killing going on. The gangs were shooting at one another, men were falling everywhere. His gang had taken cover, trading shots with the rival gangs.

“To be honest, Miguel, I was employed by the Marshall station. I have a peace keeping mission to serve out. I-”

He glanced down upon the form of Miguel, with its mouth gaped open and its eyes frozen in a half opened position. The once sun browned complexion was now a pasty, slightly bluish white. He raced into cover behind the rocks with Rolf and Santiago, trading shots with the gangsters.

“What in the hell!,” screamed Rolf at the top of his lungs.

“If we could only make it back down to our supply cart below, there are more sticks of dynamite,” gasped Santiago.

“You mean you forgot to bring them up like I asked?,” the stranger asked Santiago between taking shots. “Where is Angel?”

“You tell both of us,” Rolf slurred, “then we’ll both know.”

Shots rang out from every direction on the plateau. Men screamed, and bodies collapsed all over the mesa area. The stranger glanced around in search of Angel, yet saw no sign.

“This might be it for us,” yelled Santiago in the stranger’s direction. “I really don’t want to go like this. I had planned to visit my family one day,” the young man spoke to the point of tears as gunshots roared, with bullets whining over head from virtually every direction.

The stranger flattened onto the ground, crawling upon his belly to the place where the other two squatted down behind the stones. War whoops of mounted warriors suddenly began ringing throughout the area from every direction.

“What now? What is this?,” screamed Rolf, as he continued squeezing off shots into the distance.

“This is hallowed ground to the Hopi, the Apache, and The Wise Ones. They heard all the commotion, the dynamite blast, the gun shots, deciding to come up here and investigate. We’ll be much better served laying low right here, allowing these events to unfold as they are. A shot rang out. An arrow sharply struck the ground right beside the place where the group had taken cover.

“Look at that, with that beautiful head dress, and that string of colorful beads around his neck, with that huge golden cross on it!”

Rolf turned to face the stranger with a huge smile covering his face.

“Back east everybody is looking for a souvenir. Headdresses are going for their weight in gold, Sands, especially when they have been carried into battle. That thing is no ordinary headdress, I tell you! That thing is one worn by a chief, a medicine chief, a prophet!”

Rolf raised his pistol, taking steady aim over his crossed left arm. Ahead the chief dismounted, with his tomahawk drawn and soon hurriedly moving in the direction of the place where they lay. Rolf fired a single shot. The Indian chief melted into a heap as he raced.

“I done it! I have done it. I shot him right between the eyes with a single bullet, for God’s sake!”

Rolf turned to face the stranger and the college aged reporter and journalist, Santiago.

“I heard the invisible war chief, Leaping Elk, owned these parts. Not only is he a prophet, he has to be the greatest warrior chief known, and the terror of both the Mexican and the US army. I’ve done it! I’ve done! I done what they said couldn’t be done!”

Rolf raced from his hiding place, into the direction of the downed Indian chief.

“Don’t! Now is not the time for it!,” the stranger screamed as he raised up, then quickly took cover again. As he lay a distant shot rang out. Rolf’s scream told the story.

“Damn fool! Poor damn fool,” the stranger gasped. “Poor, greedy, damn fool!”

“I fear such is the fate of both individual men and entire nations,” the fearful journalist, Santiago said as the nervous stranger crawled up by his side.

Shots rang out from every direction. Indian war whoops, Spanish and English screaming oaths filled the air. Arrows zipped though the air, striking all around the two. Bullets sang from every direction. The sounds of screaming horses made both of them cringe as much as those of the men, as the two lay in cover.

Time passed that felt like an hour. Suddenly all was an unsettling graveyard kind of quiet. An eerie wind seemed to howl more now on the far distant desert plain, than before. A bizarre spiritual presence captivated the intellects of the two, who gazed around with widened eyes. A pervasive quietness gnawed at their very souls. Even the highly seasoned composure of the stranger was not at ease. Slowly the two arose upon their feet.

"My God!," gasped the stranger.

"Look at all of the dead!," gasped Santiago as he struggled to speak. "What were they fighting over? Did Miguel tell you anything?"

"I was sent here to lead him to a sarcophagus, a native coffin, where legend has it that an ancient sun god was buried," the stranger intimated, as the two surveyed all of the dead bodies strewn in virtually every direction.

"But all of this, for that?," the journalist exclaimed in heaving gasps of breath, when he viewed the shattered bloody carnage.

"All of that, for this, I fear," replied the stranger with a sign, as he continued to view his dismal surroundings. "Looks like both of us have one hell of a job to our good credit now."

"What?," gasped Santiago.

"Is your knife good and sharp?," the stranger asked.

"Always," the young man replied with an air of new found cheer in his voice.

“Well then, boy, take up your piece and follow me. We have duty to the good of all men, for us to complete.”

Slowly the stranger walked out of his hiding place, toward the area where the Indian chieftain lay. His hair was braided into two lengths running down on either side of his head, and wrapped neatly and tightly in otter hide.

“Take that headdress, his gun, his knife, and his tomahawk, and lay those items to the side.”

The youth did as he was commanded.

“Watch me real closely, boy, then go out there and do as I do.”

The stranger grabbed the two lengths of hair, pulling upward upon them both, while he carefully sliced around the Indian’s head. The still warm flesh peeled backwards from the fore head easily. The stranger held up the skin of the man’s head, with the hair still in perfect place.

“Now you go to each and every Indian body, and do as I just did.”

“But sir?,” the youth exclaimed with a heavy gasp, and an appearance of terror on his face.

“Don’t but me, boy, just do as I ordered you!,” firmly replied the stranger.

So the two worked for two more hours. The stranger glanced upward as the sun stood in the 2 O’ clock position. He struggled with himself in regard to the gruesome deed he was doing, but in the passing of time he over came those feelings. The young man even found himself getting much better at cutting the flesh of the Indian's heads, then snatching the skin and hair off. In the passing of what felt like a short time, the last one was completed. A rather large and growing pile of native bow, arrows, six more nice well made original

headdresses, a few pistols, and lots of ammunition, lay in a heap in the center of the plateau.

“Wow, I can’t believe all of this,” exclaimed the youth.

“Well, now I want you to help me get all of this stuff down the hill to the cart. If there is not enough room we’ll dump the stuff there in it onto the ground, and make room.

So the young man and the boy carried the heap of scalps, one loathsome armload at a time, down the mountain and over toward the cart. He counted more than twenty loads, where they averaged five scalps per load. Surely there must have been more than two hundred warriors battling it out.

“Honestly sir, it looked to me like the Indians were even fighting it out among themselves,” the young man said to the stranger.

“Good observation, boy. They were, you are right,” the stranger replied.

“But why? I could see why they might have been fighting with these gangsters, but why with each other,” exclaimed the youth with a look of frustration on his face.

“Maybe four different tribes were contesting this sacred ground for their own,” the stranger said.

“Yeah, it’s possible, but somehow I feel like there is more to this.”

“You are learning fast, boy,” replied the stranger as he grabbed up five or six pistols from the pile, and headed on over the plateau edge where the horses were tied. He gazed off into the vast expanse all around him, as if he were in search of something.

“Maybe the Indians were fighting one another for the same reason the gangsters were, eh?,” the boy half asked and half stated.

“Out in this part of the country, gut instincts come in handy,” intimated the stranger. “ You are learning fast, I am so happy to see.”

Chapter Eleven

So Much Work To Do

Hours must have passed, but it only felt like one hour at most. All of the scalps, guns, ammunition, and Indian artifacts worth holding onto, were carried and placed into the cart. The remaining tools carried in were dumped directly onto the ground, since they took up much needed space. The stranger gazed all around over the plateau.

“Now comes the real work in this great adventure you have propelled yourself into here.”

“What work, sir? Tell me and I’ll only be happy to assist,” the young man replied in youthful cheer.

“We are gonna have to gather up all of these bodies around here,” the stranger said.

“You mean the Indian bodies?,” the youth exclaimed.

“No, these gangster bodies.”

“What about the bodies of Miguel and Rolf?,” the young man exclaimed as his breath seemed to heave.

“Them too, boy, them too,” replied the stranger underneath his breath, as he anxiously gazed all around.

“Where are we taking them to?”

“We are gonna pile them up on the edge of that plateau there, right above where our horses are tied.”

“Then what? Then what are we going to do with them?,” asked the young man.

“Once we clean this whole area up, we are goin’ to carry these bodies down to the cart, and pile them beside that cart. We’ll begin with those laying up by the

limestone white face of the plateau edge then, the ones covered all over in tattoos with Spanish writing and native pictures on them."

So the stranger grabbed the two hands, and the youth grabbed the feet, on the nearest corpse. The two carried the corpse to the area above where the cart and horse were tied onto stone below. Carrying dead weight was a great struggle. Sweat poured off the two in streams as they labored out in the blazing desert sun.

"Thank the good Lord above for shading hats, and bandanna's to cover our necks," sighed the young man.

"Yeah, thank the good Lord for that, and so much more, boy," replied the stranger.

Eventually the two had all of the bodies piled above the area where the horses and the cart was tied, including those of Miguel and Rolf. The young man winced as he gazed into their seemingly frozen faces. The two paused for a bit, then began work on relocating the bodies down the hill, carefully piling each and every one beside the cart. Eventually their labor was complete. All of the gangster bodies were cleaned from upon the plateau above. The stranger began glancing all around, saying nothing as he did so.

"What are we gonna do now?," asked the youth with a gasp.

"You are going to help me load ten into this cart, boy," explained the stranger.

"Then what, Ringo. Am I right, they call you Ringo, right?"

The stranger sighed, then replied;

"Yeah boy, that's alright. You may call me Ringo."

“Ringo Arenas! That name rolls off my tongue in manner giving me a feeling I really like. I’m putting all of this down in my notes, right here and now!”

“Yeah boy, you do that now,” exclaimed the stranger as he gazed around surveying the surroundings. “That’s the thing for you to do. You do that,” he sighed.

The young man helped the stranger load ten bodies from the large pile stacked beside them, up into the cart. The weight had to be evenly distributed, so both of them were very careful about how they laid each one. Compared to the work the two had already done, the job was over in a mere blink of time. Again they paused.

“I still can’t help but ask one single question,” asked Santiago

“Whats that?,” the stranger asked in reply as he wiped the sweat from his forehead with the bandanna hanging around his neck.

“What on earth exactly is in that cave, causing all of this big mess we are involved in?”

“Since the worst part of the work is done, I guess we’ll both have a duty to ourselves and the day, to go up there and find out. What do you have to say about this, boy?”

“Sounds like another fine chapter in my book,” the young man replied.

The two made their way up the hill, over the plateau, and over toward the cave. As they were about to step inside, a stir from among the rocks and the sand, caught there attention. They both turned, spotting the dirt covered figure of Angel emerging from inside the catacomb complex. He paused, heaving as he breathed, gritting his teeth with a composure of complete rage on his face.

“I knew it! I just knew it! You damn, dirty, double crossing dog, you, I knew it! There’s gold in that catacomb! There’s more gold coin stuffed into bags in there than the whole world affords. That’s what these gangs were all fighting over. The top gang robbed the bank over in Hildego, down there. The top gang stashed this amount here, in this catacomb complex. They also stashed an equal amount of extortion fees from those sub-gangs who were battling it out with them!”

He paused as he stood heaving, struggling to breath in the sweltering heat.

“The Indians? Well, I figured all of them out. Mitch, the Coach Master from Durrango, tipped them off, hoping they would kill the gangs. He didn’t really care about us, if we got it. He had another gang wanting him to locate a prize for them. He could easily make up with his take from them, in what he lost paying out to all of us.” Angle paused, gazing around, “Looks like they have successfully done their part, from what I can tell.”

“Yeah, we all have a part to play in matters of the flesh, I suppose,” the stranger replied.

“Now its time for me to do my part in this master plan of Mitch. He hired me to kill Miguel’s gang there. I got extra payment to take you out with them. You were only a filthy gopher anyway, and you think you are so damn slick! I had to figure it all out for myself. Mitch always did have a way of engineering such deals in advance, where materialization strangely happens, somehow all according to his plan. He has a mind better than Satan himself. No wander Miguel used to claim the man was possessed!”

“Yeah, he’s good at what he does, for sure,” the stranger said.

“I knew it all along. I knew it from you. Now I know for sure. You’re in with the Marshall, Sands! Oh, I forgot, your real name is Ringo Arenas; the son of a son, of a Goddamned murdering backstabber. You’re a worse criminal than the ones you are in pursuit of. I’ve been watching you all along. You are collecting your bounty, for sure, but when I do what I have to, I’ll move this fortune in gold for Mitch, and I’ll surely collect my grand share of what will be a staggering reward! You’ er finished Ringo, right here and now, for all time to come. Get ready to meet your maker!”

Ringo smiled broadly. He reached into his pocket and pulled a pinch of plug chew. He slowly placed the chew into his mouth with his right hand. He chewed slowly as he continued to smile, and gaze directly into the eyes of the enraged Angel.

“You are mighty perceptive, Angel. In fact, you’re not nearly as dumb as you look,” spoke the stranger.

Ringo eased his face over to the side, and spat black juice onto the sand.

“While you were busy connecting all the dots, you still forgot to learn one more important lesson of life, and that’s patience. Somewhere its written that patience is a virtue. Some famous saying tells us so. You have never read that, have you Angel? Or have I forgotten that you probably can’t read?”

Ringo and Angel stood facing one other, with their open hands by their pistols, hanging on their sides. Santiago eased along backward in mounting fear, somehow sensing the worst was in this for him, should the mighty Ringo ever go down. What was he gonna do? Where could he run to? How would he make it

back to safety? What was destined to be his own take in this venture, but what good would it do when he was dead?”

Chapter Twelve

The Great Contest

Angel tossed back his head as he began to cackle his hysterical hyena laugh. It almost appeared that he wouldn’t be able to stop. Ringo spat again onto the ground, while leaning his head to the side. Angel suddenly calmed.

“I dreamed of this magic moment, Ringo,” snarled Angel in his smoke and asthma strained voice. “I long fantasized about murdering you in your sleep, or from behind when you least expected it. Now here I am, just you and me, right here, with only the desert and the wind to witness this glorious occasion. Most surely, they’ll never be another moment like it, ever again! Just I, little ole me, am soon to slay the one and only Ringo Arenas, The Magnificent, The Glorious One, as the natives know you!”

Ringo calmly leaned over to spit more juice upon the ground. A soft grinding sound originated from the heap of blasted stone by the wall of the cave. Suddenly the faint but very audible grind transformed into a piercing unnerving rattle. Ringo glanced over to the side, spying a massive six inch diameter, twelve foot long sidewinder rattle snake coiling up beside the mouth of the cave. The stripes were astonishingly reminiscent of those on a tiger. The head was the size

of a grown man’s fist. The rattles were the average size of of a man’s index finger.

Angel exploded into a stomach churning laughter again, soon calming down. Ringo displayed no sign of emotion, only remaining in calm examination of the events unfolding before him.

“Lets make this special occasion an interesting record for the ages, Ringo, ole boy now. Watch the snake as he coils,” Angle spoke as he pointed into the snakes direction. “Behold that magnificent head, son! A man could do some real damage if he had a cod that would rouse up, with glorious head like that! Now wouldn’t he Ringo, you ole devil there?”

Angel leaned back his head, roaring in his antagonizing, nauseating, psychopathic laughter seemingly for many minutes before calming down again.

“He’s beautiful, don’t you agree. He’s like me, lightning fast.., and he’s deadly, damn deadly son! They say he can leap his full length. Should he strike and make a solid hit, it is said that even the biggest, strongest man, will only take three steps, then collapse, deader than if flying lead had struck him deep into his heart. He’s as lethal as the tiger he looks like. Imagine that for a moment, son..! Some who have traveled to Africa and India call him the tiger of the plains.”

Angel rolled back his head in hysterical laughter again, gasping for breath repeatedly as if he could never stop.

“I love it! I love it! The excitement I feel here and now, beats any found in the best bordello all to hell and back.”

Angel pointed with his index finger toward his right hand side in the distance.

“ You see that flat rock on that pile behind you?”

The stranger hesitated to turn, somewhat, not trusting Angel.

“That’s right, for God’s sake, go ahead! Don’t be afraid when there’s nothing to fear but fear itself, here now!,” spouted Angel.

The stranger slowly turned, spotting a man sized flat rock sitting upon a shattered waist high pile of stone, some forty feet away.

“Well I’m going to pace thirty yards out from that stone, to the left, and drop my gun, my only weapon, right down on ground, just like that. See? Its all that I have!,” spoke Angel, emptying out his pockets, pulling off his leather coat, shaking it out, and laughing his perverted laugh. He walked passed the stranger over to the stone, than paced to the left thirty yards out to the left, counting as he did so.

“Thousand and one, thousand and two, thousand and three,” he counted out loud as he paced. Finally he finished counting. “Thousand thirty!” He snapped around facing the stranger, stooping to place his revolver onto the ground by his feet. He stood back up with a sharp snap.

“Now, it’s your turn, Ringo! You walk on over toward that flat stone, and place your own pistol down on it.”

The stranger walked very cautiously as the huge snake coiled up, hissing, and rattling with a near ear piercing rattle in the abrupt silence engulfing the moment at hand. He strode toward the flat stone, carefully and cautiously placing his pistol atop.

“Now, I’m going to astound your eyes, and show you what true Spanish lightning looks like,” Angel roared, as he began cavalierly walking passed the stranger in the direction of the huge coiled snake. The snake hissed and rattled

as Angel crouched, moving upward and down, and side to side as the great snake's fist sized head arose, while slowly drawing backward, flicking its forked tongue looking to strike. In an instant the huge snake struck, Angel sidestepped in the same instant, quickly grabbing the snake lengthwise as he extended, immediately beneath the head, in perfect coordination the same instantaneous motion of the snake itself. Now holding the snake up and away from his body, Angel strode over toward the flat stone where the stranger's pistol lay, placing the massive deadly serpent atop the pistol. The huge snake coiled, almost instantly drawing back to strike again when Angel released him.

"You see Ringo, like money and the value of gold, its all about simple mathematics here. Can you eyeball length measurement, or can you only figure blood money when it comes to doing math?"

He raised back his head, roaring in laughter. The chin strap of his sombrero styled hat seemed to almost cut directly into his sun browned face.

"Can't you see? The aggressive snake is only twelve feet long. His actual strike distance is only one quarter of his length, in reality. That equals four feet, Ringo, in case you happen to miss the calculation. So I stood five feet back, enticing the snake to strike. When he struck, the hand is quicker than the eye, and much faster than the snake can withdraw. Therefore, I catch him solidly in a spot rendering this big bad critter totally helpless. You like that?" Angel chuckled. " You like how such a magnificent creature can be rendered so helpless, by a man such as myself?"

Again he roared back his head in his infamous hyena-like laughter, as the great snake coiled and hissed over the pistol, atop the flat stone.

“This is the deal here, Ringo. He, who is fast enough to grab the pistol without getting struck by the snake, can slay then other. That is, unless the other is fast enough to make it thirty yards back to the gun laying down over there.”

Again Angel exploded into laughter for what seemed like virtual minutes, heaving for breath before calming. Ringo remained calm and silent, licking his drying lips as he deliberated his next movement.

“What a you think about this set up?,” Angel roared. “ Isn’t it nice? Isn’t this a real man’s competition for us, all the world and the ages henceforth, to see just who is going to be the better man? And pause for a moment here to think about all of that glittering gold he will have at his personal disposal, to dive and wallow in? Just think about that fact for a moment, now! See Ringo, there is a bright light at the end of this long tunnel we have been on, isn’t there now?”

“But what about the kid over there, Angel?,” Ringo asked in a very concerned voice.

“Well what about him?,” roared Angel, as he chuckled underneath his breath.

“If I should die, then who on earth will see him back to safety in town? And what about all of these dead bodies? I can’t see you collecting any bounty on them, since it will be you who has to carry them over to the Marshall's office,” Ringo asked.

Angel suddenly dried up his chuckle, replacing it with a voice of agitation at the question.

“The boy? Oh sure, the boy there! Well hell, I’ll just kill him outright, and leave him for buzzard food, right along with you and all the others! What kind of a question is that for you to ask me at a time like this?,” Angel raged in answer.

Ringo gave no reply, he only turned again to face the hissing rattler as he moved menacingly atop the pistol on the flat stone.

The huge serpent coiled and carefully eyed the two as they crouched, walking around the stone pile where the flat stone sat. Every now and then the snake would hiss loudly, then suddenly lash out, narrowly missing one or the other. Angel moved closely to the snake, while the serpent fixed his eyes on Angel. Instantly Ringo saw his opportunity.

Ringo rushed in to seize the pistol, with his right hand only mere inches from it. Angel turned, then struck a lightning heavy left with his fist, punching Ringo solid directly on the jaw. The serpent lashed out again, narrowly missing Angel, while Ringo now stood out, rubbing his bruised jaw. Angel glanced over at Ringo, smiling broadly.

“What’s the matter, oh mighty Ringo? I thought you had this game of life all figure out! I will inform you of one small detail here, however. He, who does manage to see the light, gets the golden prize. Same for life as it is in this venture. May the best man come out victorious, and far wealthier for doing so!”

Angel tossed back his head, roaring in laughter. He eventually settled back down, then eased back up to where the rattling serpent sat, shaking his tail furiously as the two crouched to encircle him. The snake seemed to be more focused on Angel, who was more aggressive in his moves toward the pistol. Angel takes his left hand and waves it before the snake, while he eases his right hand toward the silver pearl handled pistol laying on the flat stone.

Suddenly Angel seizes the pistol. The huge snake strikes in that same instant. The snake’s wicked face on that fist sized head and a mouth filled with dripping

white fangs brush the shirt sleeve on Angel's left arm. He instantly backs off, snatching the pistol up from the flat rock, then in the same motion shooting the snake directly in the head. With no more thought placed into the question, Ringo runs for the other pistol laying thirty yards away, being careful to zigzag sharply as he did so, hoping to throw Angel off in his aim. He leaps to the ground, grabs the pistol from the sand, then rolls around in the sand , before clamoring over some scattered stones atop a small roll in the desert terrain..

As he lays behind the roll for cover, he takes his own careful aim atop his arm with the pistol he had picked from the ground. An unsettling shotgun blast roars unexpectedly from the right side. Angel suddenly collapses into a heap beside the flat stone and the dead snake, without ever firing a single shot. Ringo glances over to his right from where the shotgun blast originated, and the boy arises from behind a pile of rocks.

"You sure are a sight for sore eyes, at just the right time," Ringo gasped as he wiped sweat from his brow with his shirt sleeve.

"I heard what he said to you. He made a threat to me, just as he did to you. These men are bad men," Santiago said.

"Where did you find the nice double barreled shot gun, there boy?," the stranger asked.

"From the Indians when we were cleaning up earlier. We didn't pick every little detail up," Santiago replied.

"Thank goodness for that," the stranger replied with a sigh.

Both men paused in silence for a few moments, surveying their surroundings carefully.

“Looks like this job is finally over with, Ringo,” the young man said with a glittering smile moving across his face.

“Well, not exactly boy,” the stranger informed laconically. “We still have a few finishing details to iron out here. I don’t think we are going to have any more company for a while, so lets go and see what’s really inside the cave here. What about it? We both need a break around here, I think.”

“I can’t wait! This chapter in my book might in fact, be the very best one,” Santiago exclaimed in a new air of great joy.

Chapter Thirteen

Finishing Details

The two slowly walked inside the catacomb corridor. Ringo reached inside a gunny sack he carried in with him, retrieving his last envelope, the one handed to him by the old man in the hood. He carefully tore open the envelope, retrieving a carefully folded, but somewhat soiled note. When he opened the note, the boy couldn’t help but notice the signature on the bottom as being Mitch Wiseman, the Coach Master from Durrango.

“What does the note say?,” asked the young man.

“The note says for us to follow the sign of the skull,” Ringo replied.

The two glanced up, gazing ahead into the darkening menacing cavern. The cavern branched, with a smoothing, barely noticeable sign of a skull to the left side of the entrance way.

“That looks like a skull to you, doesn’t it boy?,” Ringo asked.

“Lets go inside. It looks like the right place to me!”

The young man picked up a three feet long splinter of dried mesquite wood thrown by the dynamite blast. He snatched a well used, very soiled handkerchief from his left rear pocket, carefully wrapping it around the cottonwood stick. Ringo retrieved a match from his pocket, striking it upon his thigh, then lighting the cloth. The two enter inside, cautiously moving forward ahead.

“According to this note, the corridor here will fork, and we ‘re supposed to take the right hand branch. I wish we had thought to bring in an extra note and pad, so we could trace this shape of the corridor out out, while translating time figures into distance. Doing this would make our way back out much easier,” Ringo informed.

“I guess it all falls on me to take the responsibility by paying careful attention to details, then, doesn’t it?,” the young man said

Ringo sighed, then replied;

“Yeah boy, I guess the responsibility falls completely on you.”

The two walked forward for what felt like thirty minutes. Soon the corridor forked. The two were careful to take the right hand branch. The young man

gazed all around as the two walked. He retrieved the note pad from his a small hip pouch and began to draw lines.

“I figure we’ve been walking for maybe five minutes now,” the young man said. “What else does the note there have to tell us?”

“According to these instructions, we are supposed to walk down the passageway where the skulls grin, make another right at the end of this passage way, then this corridor branch ends in a chamber referred to as the blood chamber here inside this note. In here, it declares, is what everybody involved in this damned adventure has so long been searching for.”

“I thought you came here as a boy, Ringo,” asked Santiago.

“I did, but this is something entirely different. I can’t quite make it out. I don’t fully trust anything with Mitch Wiseman’s signature on it. I keep thinking about what Angel told me earlier,” Ringo said.

“I thought Mitch sent you out to us?,” Santiago asked.

“He did, boy, he did, but Mitch always plays for Mitch. I have to give him credit for being a mastermind in the art of anticipation.”

“There’s another fork up ahead. Look! I can barely make it out in the torchlight. There’s a grinning skull sitting in a niche not far below the stone ceiling of the corridor,” Santiago exclaimed, with fresh excitement in his voice.

The two continued onward, walking passed the skull grinning in the niche. All along the wall on both side in a series of niches extending the full length of the corridor, there were skulls grinning in the dancing flicker of torchlight as they moved along. Strangely the skulls appeared to almost come to life in the movement of the fire light. Some skulls appeared dried, but others seemed

somewhat fresh. In silence as the two walked along, the young man fantasized that the skulls might begin speaking to them, telling them where the gold lay and what exactly lies ahead in the stone corridor.

“What do you think that all of this is?,” asked Santiago.

“I don’t honestly know, but I am thinking these might be the skulls of community leaders who failed to pay the demanded extortion fees to the top gang, if not the skulls of competitor gang leaders.”

“What do you think we’ll find at the end of this corridor, Ringo?,” the young man asked as his eyes suddenly brightened from underneath his sweat wilting hat.

“I’m not exactly sure, boy, but I feel like its going to be damn well worth our time.”

When the two finally reached the backside of the grinning skull corridor, they made the right hand turn down a sudden, narrowing extension of the corridor. When the two rounded the ninth corner, they walked into a rather compact solid heavy wooden chamber door, with a heavy black painted wrought iron lock. The stranger reached into his right vest pocket, retrieving the key handed to him by the bishop in Hildego. He shoved the key inside as the sound echoed throughout the corridor complex seemingly. The massive wooden and iron door creaked open slowly, exposing a dead end chamber room large as a bordello diner. Near the ceiling of this room was a faded red line. In the floor were what seemed like a large quantity of cloth bags. Santiago picked one of the bags up, untied it, then dumped out the contents onto the floor.

“Wow, look at that!,” exclaimed the young man with fresh excitement in his voice. “ Just look at that, Ringo. Ten, rather large Spanish gold pieces!”

Ringo carefully picked one of the gold pieces up from the floor, biting down on it.

“Yep, its real gold alright, all one thousand dollars of it,” Ringo spoke to the young man.

“So that means there is ten thousand dollars worth of gold in this one bag, then Ringo! Eh?”

“Yep, you catch on fast boy. How bout counting those bags out for me, there, while you’re at it,” Ringo replied on a sudden breath.

“One, two, three, four, five, six..,” soon his verbal counting transformed into whispers. “Looks like there are thirty.”

“Pick several bags at scattered random, then dump their contents,” Ringo commanded.

The young man carefully selected seven bags at random, dumping their contents onto the stone floor of the room.

“Wow, there are ten golden thousand dollar coins in each bag!,” he exclaimed in excitement.

“That means there must be three hundred thousand dollars down here. I’m thinking that at least fifty of it must be the bank’s, back in Hildego there.”

“Whose are the other bags full?,” asked Santiago with new excitement.

“The other fifty thousand dollars must be extortion fees extracted from the local communities. The Marshall should know all about it when we make it back in town there,” exclaimed Santiago.

“And what about the other two hundred thousand dollars worth, Ringo?”

“We’ll see when we make it back to Hildego.” Ringo said, thinking back on the words of Angel. “What we saw out there was a war between a top gang, his competitors, and his subordinates. I figure that subordinates hate being subjected to paying extortion tribute, and rival competitors want it all for themselves. We’ll see if there are any more details when we make it back to the Marshall’s office.”

Before leaving out of the chamber, the young man wrapped another old cloth around the already scorched piece of cotton wood, then struck a match to form a torch. The flame caught quickly onto the dusty dried cotton cloth. Again the thick darkness in the chamber was completely alight. Carefully Ringo picked up ten of the cloth bags in the darkness, while the young man patiently waited to the side. The two followed the meandering stone catacomb back out into the main entrance, thanks to the young man’s recollection and his note pad. When they stepped back into the sunlight from the entrance way in the catacomb. The two paused again to savor the fresh outside air.

“Lets gather the bodies up from our fellow gang members, and maybe a few more, then make our way back down the hill to the cart. Don’t speak a word of what we have found inside. Let me do all of the talking when we get back there to Hildego, boy.”

“Sure, why not?,” replied the young man.

As the two men moved around carrying the slain bodies, the young man began asking loads of questions.

“Mitch is a real criminal himself. Why doesn’t the Marshall arrest him?”

“Mitch knows a lot about the dark underworld. Plus he can be bought off to the highest bidder. So therefore he is more a helper than a hindrance, son, strange as it sounds.”

“But Ringo, people die because of his manipulations. Some of those people are law enforcement people too! Not to mention the outright innocent civilians.”

“Yeah, you are so right boy. Because of Mitch and his self serving manipulations, many people die, often law enforcement officials and innocent civilians.”

“So why is he allowed to go free?,” Santiago asked rather inquisitively.

“Well the ways of the world are wicked. Everybody has their own interests to serve. Right now he serves the interests of law enforcement best. In the end, his day of retribution will at long last finally arrive, and whatever it is that’s left of his dark dealings will then be in the best interests of the blessed finder.”

“I don’t understand,” the young man replied with a sigh.

“It will all come about in in time, just trust me. Experience is always the best teacher. Be sure to put all of this I am telling you into that book you are writing, now boy.”

“Oh I am, I most certainly am, Ringo, you can count on that!”

Santiago took his note pad out and paused to scribble, while they both stood beside the body of Angel. Ringo paused to carefully skin out the huge snake, and to gut the snakes body out.

“They call you Ringo Arenas, eh? That’s an attractive sounding name. Do they really call you that? Is that your real name?”

The stranger signed deeply as he tore out the last bit of insides from the snake.

“Yeah boy, they really call me that.”

The young man scribbled hurriedly in his note pad.

“This is going to be real good. I promise you that much.”

“Yeah? Well grab those five cloth bags over there while we get this last corpse back down to the wagon,” Ringo said to the young man.

They placed the ten cloth bags filled with golden coins onto the corpse of Angel, as they made their way back down the hill to the wagon. When they finally laid the corpse to rest, Ringo grabbed the ten cloth bags, then carefully sat them in the wagon first. He slowly turned to face the young man.

“Now what I need you to do is help me lift ten of those corpses onto this small wagon here. Lay them carefully so they will be perfectly balanced, since this half arsed wagon is only a light two wheeler now. It will be enough for now, to do what we must do. We’ll start loading with the four from our gang first.”

“What are we gonna do with the others, Ringo?”

Ringo glanced upward toward the sun, then replied as he began to lay hand on the body of Angel.

“Just do as you’re told, boy. This ain’t exactly the time for asking anymore questions.”

They rested the three bodies of their gang first, then seven more at random of the others laying beside the cart.

“Saddle up on your horse, now boy, we got a long ride ahead of us.”

The two headed on back across the desert expanse with the ten bodies on the cart, traveling as quickly as it was possible to do. When they finally rode into the town of Hildego, luckily the Marshall was in his office.

“Well its good you made it back here. Darkness hasn’t yet fallen out here in desert land, so you are still in the clear. I’ll have my deputies help you off load that wagon, there. How many do you have?”

“Ten,” Ringo replied

“Well I have your reward right here, waiting, fresh from the governor’s office , in an iron coffer he asked us to set aside specially for reward money.”

The Marshall grabs up a black wrought iron box from beside his desk. He throws open an unlocked lid. The box is virtually one square foot and filled with what appears to be Spanish gold pieces.

“Fellow there, what’s you name?,” the Marshall asked as he placed his hand into the opened box.

“They call me Ringo, Ringo Arenas,” the stranger replied.

“Ten of these criminal gangsters are worth three thousand dollars a piece, dead or alive,” the Marshal continued. “ Each one of these Spanish gold pieces are worth a thousand dollars, American. So here is an old cloth bag. Count ‘em for yourself as I put em in. One for you, two for you, three, four, for you..,” his audible counting turned into whispers.

Ringo counted as did the Marshall.

“That’s twenty eight, twenty nine, and thirty for me. Thirty thousand in gold for me,” said Ringo.

“That’s right! Thirty thousand for you,” said the Marshall as he handed Ringo the bag filled with coins.”

“I know about the stolen money from the bank,” Ringo informed the Marshall.

“Do you have that?,” the Marshall asked.

“Sure. Was there anything else of concern that needed returning?”

“Ringo these criminal gangs extorted so much money from these local townspeople, it just breaks my heart to think about it. I am not expecting to ever see any of it, to be quite honest about it.”

“Well, how much?,” Ringo asked.

“We are not completely sure. We’ve gone around and asked these local Mayors to give us an estimate. We’ve calculated the figure to fifty thousand dollars in gold, between these four settlements alone. Who knows about what was extorted from those criminal lairs and feral towns, laying deep inside the Mexican interior. These are the areas hiding the top gang from all pursuers. We are really not concerned about returning anything of theirs, since any of their gains were only extorted from other criminals. There certainly exists innocents somewhere who were victims, but the chains go back way to far for anybody to trace. Besides that, should we ever to bother asking, every community in the whole damn interior will stand around in a great circle with their hands held out. You can be sure of that!”

“That’s sure good to know, but give a minute,” said Ringo, who turned to step out the door. In what must have not been more than two minutes, he returned with five cloth bags in each hand. He took the five bags in his left hand, then set them on the Marshall’s desk.

“Here’s fifty for the bank,”

Ringo somewhat struggled to heave the other five bags in his right hand upon the Marshall’s desk.

“Here’s fifty for the townsmen.”

The Marshall dumped three bags out onto his desk. He slowly counted the coins.

“It looks like thousand dollar gold pieces, same as I gave you.”

“Yep!,” announced Ringo with a glowing smile of positive accomplishment.

“Damn you’re good, Ringo! I see you got the gangsters we were after, and a few more to boot.”

“Yep, and a lot more to boot, a ways out from here,” Ringo replied.

“I know its dark now, but this is urgent. I’ll send six deputies out with you tonight, and each will have his own wagon. Where are they going to?”

“San Andres, a small settlement, or should I say, just outside of it.”

“Good as done,” spoke the Marshall in confidence. “Do you have anything else for me this evening?”

“Ugh, I think I just might. Let me go check,” Ringo told the Marshall.

He stepped back outside for two minutes, then returned carrying a rather large burlap bag.

“What in the hell?,” exclaimed the Marshall.

“Two hundred Indian scalps -”

“Two hundred Indian scalps!,” suddenly exploded the Marshall.

“Yep, and one great big rattle snake hide.”

“Well lets count them all out here,” raged the Marshall as he dumped the dried scalps from the bag. “One, two, three, four, ten, twenty, a hundred,” his verbal counting transformed into whispers.

“Yep,” said Ringo, “there’s a hundred fifty, a hundred eighty, and.., two hundred, right there.”

“Well I’ll be damned. Somehow you’ve managed to solve the native insurgency for northern Mexico and the lower Southwestern US at the same time. That’s equal to what, two hundred of those Mexican gold pieces? I was told by a number of mouths that you were good, Ringo. I am so happy that you have not let me, or any of us around in these parts, down.”

“Yep, thousand dollar gold pieces. That comes to twenty cloth bags of ten,” Ringo said.

“We have it all right here, courtesy of the Governor himself,” the Marshal informed him.

The US Marshall counted out the cloth bags, then selected the golden coins from the box, placing ten into each bag.

“That’s two hundred, plus thirty one, plus twenty five. That’s two hundred, fifty six thousand dollars,” Ringo whispered to himself.

“Oh, the deputies are already loading up. You don’t have to stare out into space and whisper to your self trying to figure it all out. The rest of this matter is all your own call now. My men are ready to go now. I don’t know about you and yours, ” informed the Marshall.

Ringo stepped outside, placing the bags filled with golden coin inside the empty two wheeled wagon. Santiago stood nearby.

“What is that?,” he asked.

“Another chapter in your book, there,” Ringo said as the young man began to quickly scribble on his note pad.

The six deputies raced around as they hooked up their own wagons, then began mounting up on their horses.

“We have an all night job ahead of us, boy,” informed Ringo to Santiago. “Tomorrow, soon as we can settle down in the shade, we’ll both rest very well.”

Chapter Fourteen

Final Haul

The six deputies followed Ringo and Santiago back to the plateau hill where the ancient ruins lay. The bodies were piled up neatly where the small wagon was once parked. This wagon remained tied back over where the Marshall’s office was in Hildego. Once they made it back to the hill, the deputies with the six wagons paused where the body pile was.

“My gosh, it must have been flat out war around here for this many men to have wound up dead,” asked one of the deputies.

“War it was,” replied the stranger. “Indeed it was a war, a great big one.”

“Some of these bodies here are very recognizable,” another deputy said. “ Our wanted posters are becoming very detailed with their photography and everything. The man laying there to the side, right here where we stand, with the great big bullet hole in his forehead, is Amarillo Gonzalez. He’s with the top gang, Falcon, and wanted for murder, theft, extortion, illegal sex slave

trafficking, and loan sharking, from Mexico City all the way up to Santa Fe. The US and Mexican authorities have been after him for years!"

A clean cut young deputy who behaved as if it were his first time out, suddenly became all excited as they began lifting the bodies into the wagons.

"Do you realize this man we are lifting here is Blanco El Malo, the Mexican terror of the American Southwest. Look!," he exclaimed, holding an old newspaper photograph close to the face of the corpse. "He's robbed banks all throughout this entire area. He's robbed individual businesses. He's kidnapped the sons and daughters of both politicians and famous stage actors, holding all for ransom at the peril of their innocent lives. He's another one that the authorities all across every territory have been after for years and years!"

He turned toward the stranger.

"I don't know how you managed to do such a thing, but you most certainly did. Your name is Ringo, right? They call you Ringo Arenas, right?"

"That's right, kid. They call me Ringo Arenas," the stranger replied.

"You'll be the pride of the whole America West, Ringo," the kid deputy shouted. "Every newspaper will have a printout about you and this great service you have provided to the entire region here. I get excited just thinking about all of it, myself!," the young kid announced.

"Well, I have been with him every step of the way," said Santiago. "I have an inside record of him. I have been writing a book about these events I have witnessed."

"This book will surely be a best seller. I can tell you that much," spoke another deputy as they worked. "I am putting in for an order of them myself,

right now. You'll both be fabulously wealthy because of this great feat you have accomplished!"

"You names will be remembered for all the ages to come!," another deputy announced. "We all heard that you were damn good at what you do, Ringo. Now we all know what the word, *good*, really looks like!"

"I have to catch myself and hold back on my desire to express my own excitement," announced Santiago. "I have certainly lived an adventure that will carry on for a lifetime. What do you make of it, Ringo?"

"Well, life just has its own way of running on its own course. Sometimes we are just lucky, or unlucky enough to get caught up in its way. There comes a time when we all have our own due to pay. These people here reached that point in time for them, that's all," slurred the stranger as he gazed around from underneath his wide plainsman's hat.

"Yeah, you're right Ringo, and we'll both get our due, won't we?," Santiago asked.

"We'll have our due, boy, we'll certainly have ours," Ringo replied.

The six wagons were full in what felt to be a fairly acceptable passing of time. Five of the wagons held twenty bodies a piece. One remaining held only twelve.

"Damn, a full hundred and twenty bodies here that the Marshall will be happy to see brought in. I still am amazed, Ringo, there!," the chief deputy stated. "I'd love to know just how you managed to do it. Law enforcement needs to study the methods of successful people like you. You ever thought about becoming a full time employee, Ringo?"

“I thought about it several times over the years,” replied Ringo. “I’m still thinking about it now. I just can't seem to make up my mind, though for some reason. Opportunities are to be snatched up when they come around. Most of the time, we have to be where they are. If I am obligated like that, then how can I meet the next one?”

“This day and time the world needs good effective law enforcement people like you. As everything develops, we would think that men would come to understand how walking down the dark trail only leads to a dead end. Somehow, it seems the more developed we become, the more these personality types feel they are above meeting that all too certain end. We are in big need of highly skilled, intelligent men like you on our team, Ringo,” the chief deputy informed the stranger.

“Are you really gonna do it? Are you going to sign on with them?,” Santiago asked excitedly.

“I’ll keep thinkin’ about it for now. Who knows? The future is as uncertain as the prairie wind, rain, and the storm,” Ringo replied as the collective group began slowly moving along with the wagons filled by crisscrossed corpses.

When the troop finally made their way back to Hildego, the rising sun had faintly lit up the distant horizon. Exhaustion was gradually settling in, but there was still a long ways to go yet for the two. The Marshall was standing on the porch to cheerfully greet them all when they rode up.

“My word, how excited I am. I knew you would come through, but I didn’t realize it would be to this degree, Ringo,” he said, as the deputies dismounted and began casually unloading the bodies. Santiago scribbled in his notes with every ounce of energy he had tied up in himself, somehow still excited by what

he was witnessing. When the corpses were finally off loaded, the Marshall glanced over at Ringo.

“When I got word to the governor of your last success, and where you were heading out to. He made sure to deliver more coin by Pony Express for payment. The bounty on each and every head there was three thousand dollars, and there are one hundred and twelve, am I not right?”

“You were right when I checked last,” Ringo stated.

“Just step on inside here with me a moment,” the Marshall said as the two men casually walked into his wood framed office building. He reached down grabbing another metal box, only this one was larger than the first. Quickly he reached inside with his right hand. He began counting out golden Spanish coins worth a thousand dollars, American.

“Here’s thirty thousand for you, sixty thousand, ninety thousand, one hundred twenty thousand, one fifty, 0ne eighty, two ten, two forty, two seventy, three hundred thousand in gold for you, Ringo. How’s that for starters?,” the Marshall asked.

“That’s great, except I need thirty six thousand more to make it even,” Ringo said.

The Marshall slung his head around in sudden agitation.

“You are a hard one, Ringo, I swear.”

“All of us get our just dues, Marshall, one way or another. You should learn that much by now. That’s why I will probably continue to freelance from now on. I like things better when I am in control.”

The Marshall handed him the thirty six gold pieces in another cloth bag.

“You take care, Ringo,” he signed as Ringo received the cloth bag filled with coin, “ and be sure to see us again sometime. We’d all love to have you around.”

“Oh, I’m sure I will, Marshall, but right now duty and life calls, and a man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do.”

“Well you be on, and take care, Ringo. Don’t try and spend all that gold in one place.”

Ringo headed out of the Marshall’s office, back over to his horse and saddle bags. He placed the bags with the gold coins inside, whispering to himself as he did so; “Two hundred fifty six thousand, plus three hundred thirty six thousand, equals -”

“Five hundred ninety two thousand,” announced Santiago.

Several heads in the passing crowds suddenly turned their way as they stirred about securing their saddles and leather bags..

“Shh, boy, keep some things to yourself!,” suddenly scolded Ringo. “Loose lips can lead to great big slips. That’s rule number two in life, boy, and don’t you ever forget that, son!”

“Well, what’s rule number one then?,” asked Santiago with a youthful curiosity on his face.

“You mean son, in all of this traveling and rough housing together, you haven’t learned what that question is yet?,” Ringo asked.

“I guess not,” replied Santiago.

“Never assume anything, boy. That’s rule number one in life. Don’t be afraid to ask, when it looks like you should. Try to anticipate all negative possibilities, then prepare for it,” Ringo informed Santiago.

“You mean like, if you are getting five hundred thousand plus, then I should feel free to ask where my share of it is, right Ringo?”

Ringo sighed as they rode out from the town.

“You are catching on more by the day, boy.”

The two plodded out from town, then on passed the edge, back down the narrow winding road out into the desert.

“Where are we headed to now, Ringo?,” Santiago asked.

“We have one last chore we have to do,” Ringo said as he gazed outward into the desert.

“What is that, Ringo?”

“Well, you want your pay in this adventure, don’t you?,” Ringo asked.

“I have the book, Ringo, and you heard the man, it will surely be a best seller!”

Ringo sighed as he slowly shook his head.

“Maybe boy, just maybe, but we have to lay hand on what lies in front of us first.”

Fast as their horses could gallop, they moved up the narrow road, then turned out into the desert again. The horses ran for what felt like three hours straight, and before Santiago realized it, they were back in the place where the large mounds were. The horses slowed to a trot back to the mound where the bodies once lay and the battle occurred.

“Why are we coming back here, Ringo?,” asked Santiago in a tired voice.

“This is the final chapter in that book you’re writing there, boy.”

Both men struggled to climb the mound, then walked toward the cave. The desert condors were circling above. Groups of these huge birds had already

settled, and were feasting on the bounty of decaying Indian flesh still laying where it had fallen. The stench in the air caused both men to wince, as they moved across the plateau toward the cave entrance.

“Its sad so many people had to die here, Ringo,” Santiago said.

“Yeah, its sad, boy, but we choose our own directions in this life, and we both choose to pick this final piece of the great puzzle up, then we both can be along on our merry way, boy.”

“What piece of the puzzle?,” asked Santiago.

Ringo never replied as the two men stepped into the catacomb. They soon were taking the fork where the skull was carved, on up to the right fork, then the fork where the grinning skulls were. When they both reached the end of the corridor where the skulls were, they made a right turn, winding, then turning the corner into the thick wooden door of the blood chamber. Ringo slowly retrieved the large iron key with the purple gem filling its holding piece. He placed this key into the heavy wrought iron lock, turning it with a heavy snap seeming to echo throughout the chamber in the dead silence strangely now upon them.

Ringo sighed deeply, then suddenly smiling broadly, turning toward the young man.

“Well boy, here we are, in the blood chamber, and everything is just as we left it. All twenty of these wonderful coin bags.”

“Why do they call this the blood chamber, Ringo? You never told me that, and I always wondered.”

“They say the Spanish captured the Hopi/Navajo chief of this entire region, way back during Conquistador times. Well, the Indians loved this chief dearly,

and begged for him to be returned. So the Spanish executed a native criminal on behalf of the tribes, taking his fresh blood, and painting this nice eight inch band you see, all the way around this cavern. They commanded the Indians to fill this room with gold up to that line, and then they would release their beloved chief."

"Wow! That's the same line, and all of that happened right here. Did the Indians do it? Did they fill this room to that line?," Santiago asked.

"Yeah, they did. It took them three months to do it, but they did," Ringo informed the young man.

"Did the Spanish release their chief?"

"Well see, boy, remember when we talked about the dangers of making assumptions?"

"Yeah," Santiago replied.

"Well, the Indians assumed that when they gave the Spanish all of this gold, the Spanish would do the honorable thing and return their chief, but they didn't."

"What did they do, Ringo? What did they do?"

"They called together a huge rendezvous, just outside there on the plateau. They cut the chief's throat, then decapitated him, boldly declaring themselves ruler of the Navajo, the Hopi, and all of their subordinate tribes, and owners by right of conquest over all of their riches and territory."

"That's all so bad," sighed Santiago.

"Yeah, that's all so horrible, son, but these twenty bags here are all ours, " signed Ringo

“That comes to two hundred thousand dollars, Ringo!,” announced the young man with an air of fresh excitement.

“Yeah, so that’s ten bags for you..,” Ringo moved them one by one, “and ten for me,” he announced as he pointed toward the ten bags remaining.

Santiago began emptying his bags, then counting the coins.

“What the hell are you doing now, boy?,” asked Ringo.

“Well, we are never to make any assumptions. I got my money!,” he said with an eager glow in his eyes.

“Lets get these bags, then move on out of here,” Ringo said as he grabbed his own bags.

Both men moved back down the series of corridors, then back out onto the plateau. They walked down the mount, and back to the place where their horses were tied. They both placed he coin bags into their leather saddle bags, then mounted up.

“Where are we going now, Ringo?,” asked Santiago.

“Awe, I personally kind of liked that village, San Andres. I think that we’ll go have a bite, then bed down there for the night,” Ringo told the young man.

The two left the ancient ruin, then headed toward the setting sun. In about an hour they were entering the adobe complex. Next to the bordello was a Spanish tavern called *Los Sapos Calientes,* painted in bold golden letters on a hanging wooden sign swinging in the evening desert wind. The two sauntered up to the bar, ordered a mug of cold beer, and a beef slab between two pieces of oven baked corn bread.

“It sure is amazing what a man will miss when enough time passes without,” slurred Santiago as he took a bite, then turned up the heavy glass mug.

Ringo gazed over the double doorway, toward the bordello across the road.

“I’ll second that. I’ll second that statement in a minute.”

When the two finished eating their meal and drinking three beers, they stepped out the doorway, walking toward the bordello. Seven beautiful native girls dressed in colorful Mexican Can Can, waved eagerly at them.

“I’ve never been in a place like this,” said Santiago.

“Which one is yours for the night?,” suddenly grinned Ringo.

“I don’t know. Which one is yours?,” the boy asked.

“I kind of like that one, dressed with the ruby and emerald necklaces. She kind of has a Gypsy type of look about her I find appealing,” Ringo chuckled.

The girl caught his glance, then began walking over in his direction.

“Hola, como estas?,” she said in perfect Spanish, as she gently rubbed his hardening bewhiskered face. “You needing some company for the evening, there, big boy?

“Si, and you look like the perfect fit for tonight, on me,” he said.

“When you feel up to it, I’m in room two twenty nine. You might need to get your things, maybe? I don’t know? My name is Margarita.”

Ringo stepped outside, getting his bags. He placed his last ten coin bags in a saddle bag all by itself. This way he could keep better track of his money. As he walked back into the building, and up the stairs, he glanced over noticing Santiago with a huge native woman some three times larger than himself! Ringo shook his head and pinched his eyes shut.

“I don’t know about that boy, but to each his own,” he spoke underneath his breath.

When he walked into the unlocked door of the room, the lady was already undressed, laying sprawled out open legged, in a rather nice canopy bed. He had better in his life, but he also had slept in much worse to go with it, far too many times.

“I thought you would never make it,” she spoke with an inebriated slur to him as he tossed the saddle bag with the ten bags in the corner of the room across from the bed, where he felt he could better watch it, and the other one underneath the bed on the side where he lay. He lay with the woman in his arms, and her warm body next to his; and in the middle of the ensuing action, somewhere he faded off to sleep from a combination of embracing comfort and shear exhaustion.

Morning arrived quickly, but the woman was gone. He placed his hand in the spot where she lay. She must have been gone for more than an hour. He snatched up his saddlebags, then headed on out the door. He walked on back over to the tavern across the street, carefully placing his saddlebags back onto his tied horse. As he walked out of the bordello, the woman was strangely and very conveniently nowhere to be found. He wanted to pay her, but neither her nor the madam, nor anybody else, was around to take his money. He walked on into the tavern, sit down at the bar, ordering a steaming cup of coffee. Damn, he sure felt good right about now. Soon Santiago staggered in, tacking a seat across the table from where he sat

“How was last night, son?,” Ringo asked Santiago.

“I got everything I wanted. I sure am glad I learned life lesson number two. Never make assumptions. She kept pushing me for more, but I hid mine from her well. I checked it before I left out, and yep, my money was still there, ever last damn dime of it.”

“Oh yeah, boy?”

“Yeah, but there was something else that was really strange. I had two and a half more bags of gold in my saddle bag. That comes to twenty five more thousand dollars! Where did it come from? After struggling for awhile with all of this, I just can’t seem to figure it all out.”

Quickly Ringo slammed down his coffee cup, racing back out to his own saddlebags. He ripped open the side with the ten bags. The saddlebag only held five! He struggled to search for more, but failed to find them

“Son of a bitch! What in the -”

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the big fat woman and Margarita, standing underneath the patio porch, talking. When the wind shifted he could barely hear their conversation.

“What are you gonna do with that cute little prize I parted with you last night?,” Margarita asked the large woman.

“I dropped half of it in the boys bag. It was the only place I could find to hide it inside that plain Jane room he chose. He was sleeping so soundly, I knew he would have never have known. I got up early to use the chamber room, and planned on getting my portion back; but somehow, dumb me, I forgot all about it. Besides, he had already paid me well, including liberal tips, and I don’t have many customers, you know. I guess such is the power in knowing how to

complete a job already well done, right? Anyway, I was utterly shocked that he chose me, with all of these others to pick from. I only wanted to say thank you. Who knows, since I was so nice to him in the bedroom, and inside his saddlebag, maybe he'll come back and be my regular." the big woman said as she began to sulk a bit."Besides all of that, he was kind a cute, you know."

Margarita sneered, then bitterly turned up her nose.

"You damn dumb bitch!," she scolded harshly in well educated Spanish, "He got his, and you deserved yours. Or would you have done anything he wanted for nothing? I honestly bet you would have, you filthy nasty slut! I can't believe you. I was being nice to you, but I should have looked out for myself instead!"

Ringo moved toward the two from across the road, but both of them instantly stepped back into the main building. By the time he made it inside, they both mysteriously vanished from the premises. He had no option remaining now, but to walk back outside into the lounge.

"I guess it's time for us to move on back out. I've had enough of this place already, myself," Ringo growled to Santiago.

The two somewhat reluctantly made their way back out again into the vast desert. When they finally camped, as they now slowly followed the mountain chain northbound, often the young man would get liquored up on the Mexican tequila he had purchased while in San Andres, fantasizing that he was some sort of a high rolling cowboy king, a big time eastern plantation owner, or an Arabian sheik prince complete with a harem at his service, or some famous person of timeless renown. One time the boy received the insane intoxicated notion that he truly was a big time cattle town judge, condemning the poor stranger, and even

people not present, for audacious crimes of passion never committed. Ringo laughed incessantly, while rolling around on his ground sheet, until he could hardly breath when the boy got like this.

When the boy finally sobered up, Ringo asked him what he planned to do. He said maybe he would ride out to Reno and become a professional gambler, own a belly dancing saloon in Wichita, or something on that order. Somewhere during all of this travel, he heard Klondike gold had been found way up in Yukon Territory. Maybe he would ride out to stake his own claim, live more adventures and write more books, after he publishes the one he has already written.

Only to speak the words *rich and famous*, made him feel *good*, damn good, no.. real damn good; the kind of *real damn good* just like that big fat nasty whore did on the night before. He never would forget how she let him ride her hard for what felt like hours. In a final conclusion of the experience, when he finally felt totally exhausted, he imagined she had swallowed all of his blood and his brains, as he lay there gasping for breath in the bed when his wonderful ride finally ended. She only charged him an additional half of her general riding fee for this conclusive magic moment still etched ever so vividly into his mind.

The sleazy way she gazed over directly into his face, licking her pursed lips, and grinning like a possum eating briers when she did this, excited him in a magnetic enticing, disgustingly debauched kind of way he would keep perfectly mum about until the day he died. *This would just be their own dirty little secret between the two of them,* he smiled as he whispered to himself. He actually pondered the thought of returning to her for a glorious second helping, but he would never mention this type of personal consideration to Ringo, or anybody

else for that matter. This would be one part of his story he would withhold from writing about in the book he would soon publish.

Ringo rolled his riding coat up to form a pillow. He laid back on his ground bedding, gazing up at the winking stars there in a boundless sky. He imagined what it would be like to fly up there, and what he might find if he could make it on to one of those winking stars so high. Would he find a different kind of woman? Could she do him a different kind of trick? Would he find a huge store of gold? Would he have to fight over it? He chuckled to himself at the silent stupid thought in the darkness.

As he drifted off to sleep, in his mind he returned to a certain beautiful proprietress of a high classed bordello, he once knew back when he was way up in Virginia City. She sent him a letter not so long ago. Now she owned a bar and dinner lounge, to go with her other famous enterprise. She was seeking a companion speculator laden with investment capital. She actually made him a gracious offer much too tough for a freeborn opportunist like himself, to ever refuse. She also recently purchased a vacant Baron's house way across the railroad tracks on the elegant side of town, she claimed in the letter. The name of this endowed, developing community was *Glitter Street.* She even sent him some newfangled pictures of it!

Her neighbors were highly successful doctors, lawyers, political people, cattle tycoons, and of course, prosperous confidence men. Everybody on that side of town were the big business, money types of people, throwing elegantly expensive house parties, and hosting fancy black tie social gatherings every weekend, showcasing the very best in food accommodation and drinks. He and this woman

both could sub-out the management of their capitol enterprises, then retire in dazzling luxury, she brazenly informed him in the letter he received a month or two ago.

He had secretly taken a special shine to this particular woman during those days of his frequent loitering on her enterprising estate, visiting her specifically, often as he could get around to doing. Somehow she was different from all the others he had known over time. He imagined himself laying up there in an elegant canopy bed with her once more again after so many enduring months, now inside this newfangled *mansion house,* so she called it. Gradually the stranger finally faded off to sleep with a broad smile on his slumbering face, in the soft glow of a full desert moon, somewhere around midnight.